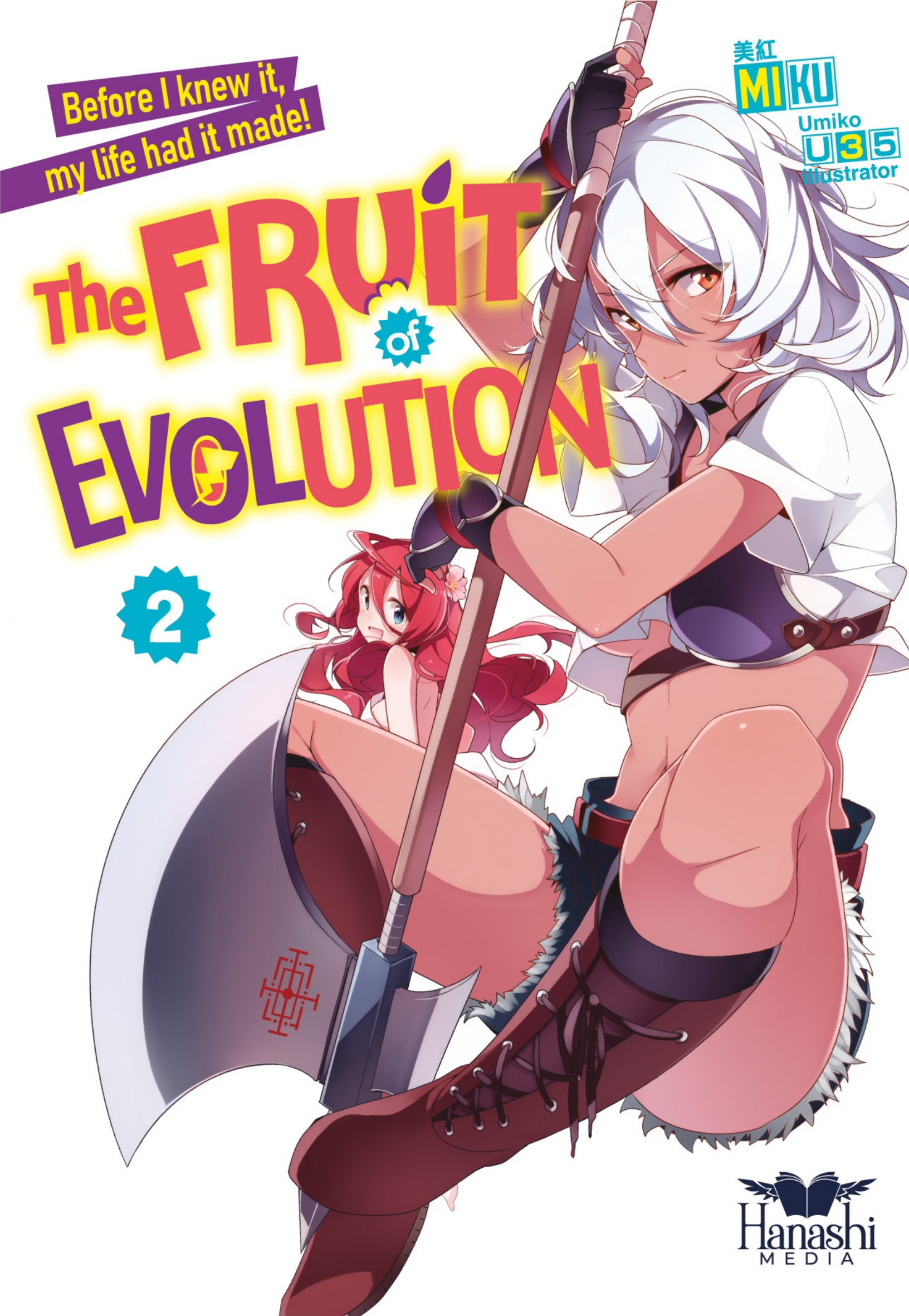




Before I knew it,
my life had it made!

美紅
MIKU
Umiko
U35
Illustrator

The **FRUIT** of EVOLUTION

2



Before I knew it,
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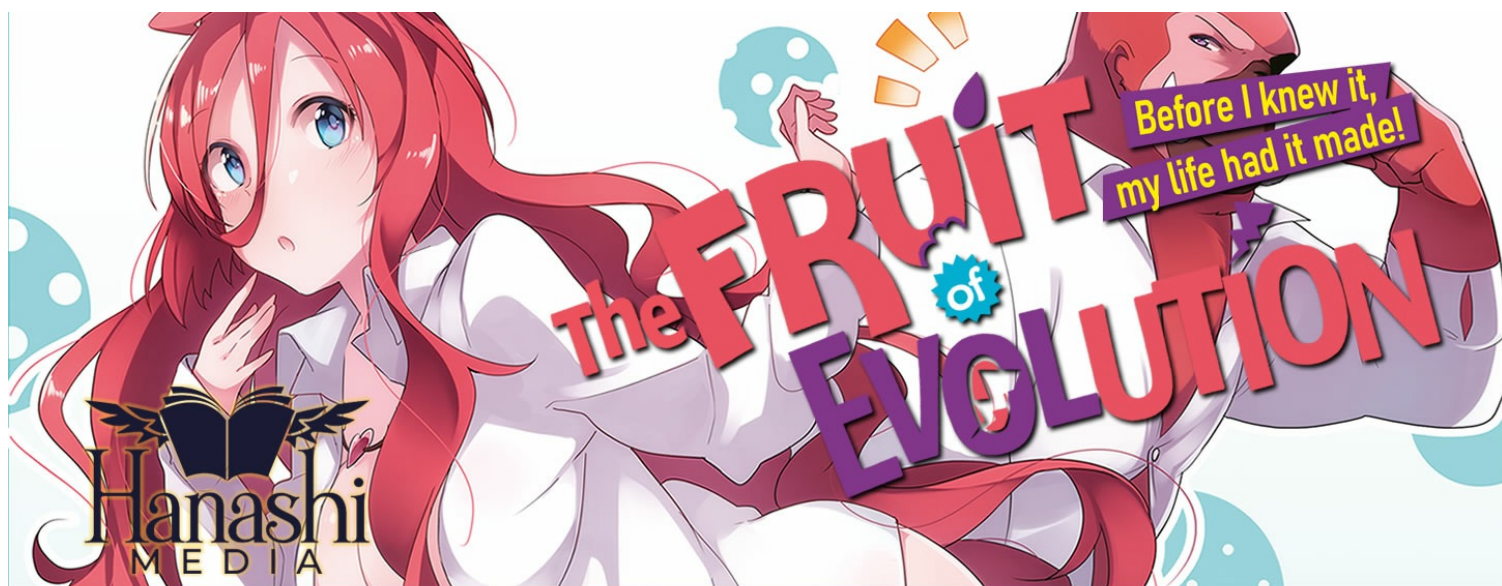
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The **FRUIT** of EVOLUTION

2




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PUBLISHING MGR:
ANDRES CABASCANGO

PUBLISHER:
ANDRES CABASCANGO
ANDRES MATA

The Fruit of Evolution: Before I knew it, my life had it made!
Vol. 2

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First published by Futabasha Publishers Ltd., in 2014

English version published by Hanashi Media, LLC in 2022

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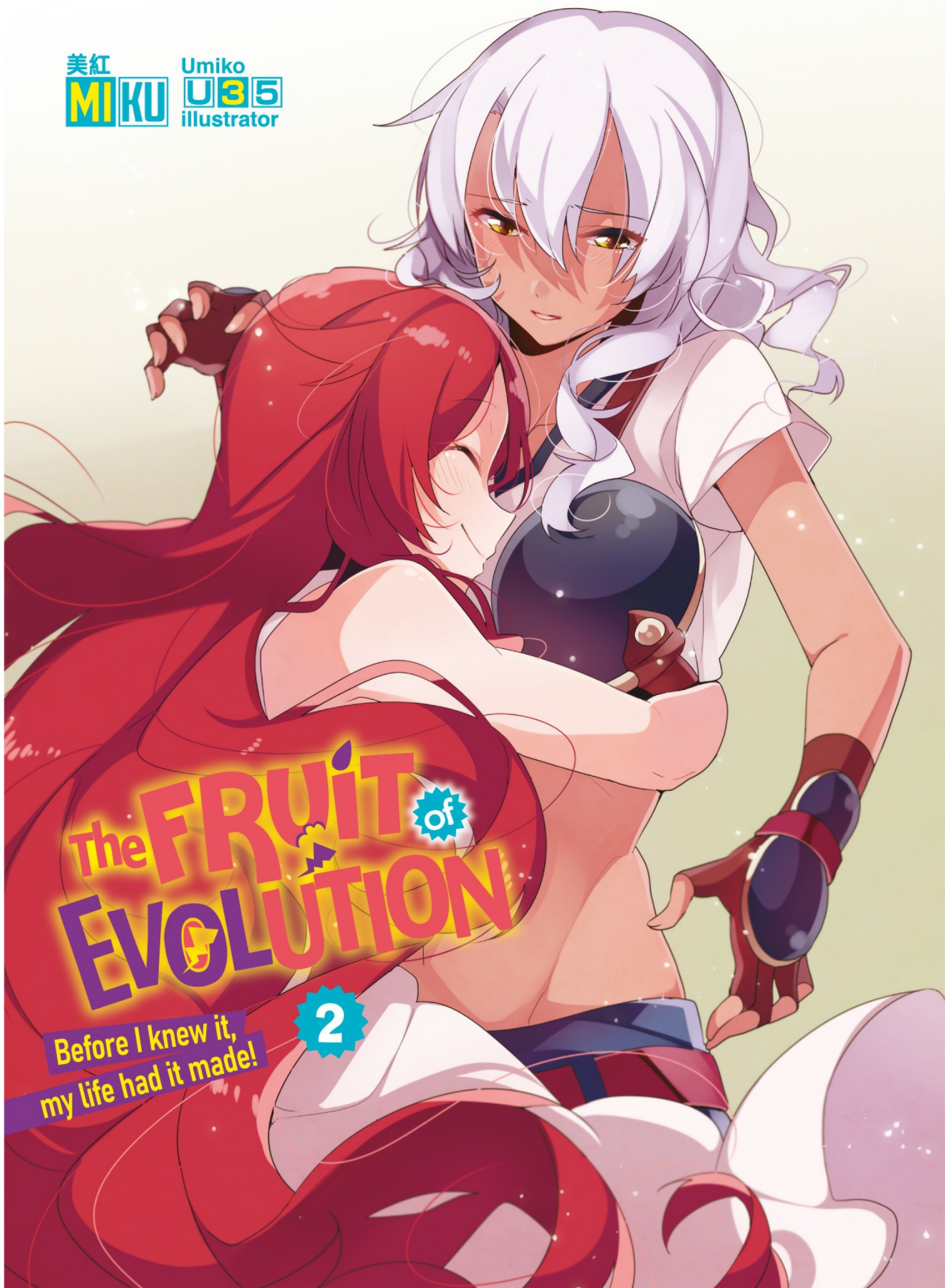
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<https://www.hanashi.media/>

ISBN: 979-8-9863709-4-1

The **FRUIT** of **EVOLUTION**

Before I knew it,
my life had it made!

2





"Great! Let's go, then!"

Saria
Kaiser Kong

"S-Slow down!"

Seichi
Human





"Just like this!"

*"Seriously!
Really, trust us!"*

*"By the way,
Saria, how're
you gonna
fight?"*

BANG!

BANG!

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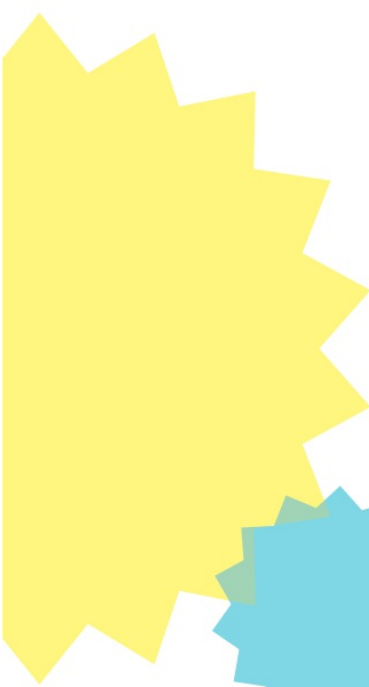
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THE FRUIT OF EVOLUTION 2

Before I knew it, my
life had it made!

Miku 美紅



Prologue

“Huh? Are we outside now?”

After the fight with Zeanos, Sheep-san teleported Saria and me outside the forest. The grass was so short that it didn't even reach my ankles. I glanced at the Forest of Endless Heartbreak behind us.

We sure spent a long time there, huh? Without it, there's no reason I'd be where I am now, physically or mentally. I lost and found my humanity there.

Maybe most importantly, it was where I met Saria and the first place I felt glad to be alive. As I was reminiscing, I heard Saria mutter beside me.

“I'm outside... For the first time ever, I'm really outside...”

Her eyes were closed, and I could tell it was just as bittersweet for her. The Forest was her home, after all.

We stood together for a moment, neither of us saying a word.

Finally, I broke the silence. “Well, I guess we should get going.”

“Okay!”

With that, we turned our backs to the Forest and started walking through the fields.

Already, my head was full of possibilities. Thanks to Zeanos' memories, I had a pretty good idea of where the closest town was. That would be our first stop. After that, we could register at the guild as adventurers. His memories and the information God gave me referenced adventurers, so they were definitely a thing in this world.

The only thing I was worried about was my Stats. If what that sheep said was true, other people could only see a tiny fraction of my power, thanks to Disguise. That was the whole reason I was wearing the motorcycle helmet.

Honestly, I wish I could take this stupid thing off.

According to him, I should be able to remove it soon enough—assuming this wasn't another one of his dumb tricks, of course.

What I was really worried about was whether or not I could use my full power while Disguise was active. I'd have to try that out sooner rather than later. If I had to fight for my life and couldn't go all out, I could be in real trouble.

Either way, heading to town came first. I decided to stop stressing about it and just enjoy walking through the fields with Saria.

Chapter 1: Slimes

Saria and I walked for several hours without much happening. Then, we came across a monster that was all too familiar to me, despite none being back on Earth.

I stopped in my tracks. “Is that what I think it is?”

Saria pointed at it energetically. “Look, Seiichi! It’s so cute!”

The creature—a Slime—jiggled at us. “Jiggle.”

Wait, it didn’t talk just now, did it? Maybe I’m wrong.

It looked like it had popped out of a classic RPG with a translucent goopy body and everything. I couldn’t imagine what else it could be. It didn’t have a face, let alone a mouth, so there was no way it spoke.

It must’ve been my imagination.

“Jiggle.”

“You *did* talk!”

How is it doing that?! Do all slimes in this world narrate their own jiggles?!

I took a deep breath. There was still a chance I was wrong, after all. It could be anything. Fortunately, I had just the Skill for the occasion. I used Greater Analysis on the creature as it hopped around.

>SLIME: Level 88

“Holy shit! Level what?!”

And it’s still just normal Slime! What the hell?! Are all Slimes that tough in this world?!

Of course, it wasn’t anywhere near the Clever Monkeys’ or the Acrowolves’ level, but it was still insane for a weak little blob like that.

I mean, c’mon! These things should be the weakest of the weak!

As I gawked at it, it started contracting and shrinking back a little.

“Wh-What?”

A moment later, it released the tension it had built up and sprung at me.

“Whuh?!”

I yelped a little, but fortunately, I had my Mind’s Eye Skill. It looked like it was coming at me in slow motion so I had no problem ducking out of the way.

“The hell’d that thing attack me?”

I guess it’s a monster, so that makes some sense.

Watching it gave me an idea. I wanted to know whether or not Disguise lowered my Stats, so this was the perfect chance to experiment. High-level or not, it was still just a weak little guy.

“Alright, let’s see what I’ve got!”

I drew my weapons—the Rapier of Festering Hatred and the Rapier of Burgeoning Love—*Black* and *White*. I could try out one of my attack Skills, but if I really wanted to see how strong I was, a regular attack would work best. I took a stab at it before it could spring at me again.

“Here I come!”

I dashed forward towards it, but something immediately struck me as off.

“Wait, how fast am I going?!”

I blinked in surprise. I’d totally closed the distance between me and the Slime in a single step, and glancing back, there was a crater where I’d kicked off a moment ago. Since the Slime was right in front of me, I put my confusion aside to focus on attacking it. I raised *Black* over my head, then swung it down.

SHAKOOOOM!

“...Huh?”

With a sound like a thunderclap, the Slime’s drop items scattered before my eyes.

.....

.....

“Again... huh?”

Still in shock, I looked up at the sixty-yard chasm my swing had carved in the plane.

.....

“What the *hell*?!”

That was a bad idea! Dammit, I never should've done this!

I instantly regretted everything as soon as I understood what I'd done. I accidentally vaporized the Slime with the sheer force of my swing. I didn't see a pile of ash or anything. Although the truly terrifying thing was, I hadn't even swung full-out. I was just hoping to maybe deal out a little damage.

“How'd I do this?!”

I should have known something was off when I 'ran' up to it, but still! How was I supposed to expect this?! Disguise isn't doing a damn thing, is it?! It just makes me look weaker! Seriously, what if I'd swung full force?! I don't even want to think about it!

As I clutched my head and moaned in despair, Saria's eyes were glittering with joy.

“That was so cool, Seiichi!” Her expression drooped slightly. “I feel a little sorry for that cute little monster, though...”

I'm sorry, too, Slime! I didn't mean to kill you like that!

Seeing Saria look so sad only made me feel more guilty about it. As I let out an exhausted sigh, a few orbs of light rose out of the Slime's drop items and flew into my chest.

“What?!”

A moment later, I heard that familiar voice. Apparently, the lights were the Slime's Stats. I was a little confused as to why I automatically absorbed them this time, but it couldn't be anything bad.

With that, I turned my attention to the rest of the drops.

“Ooh, let’s start with the Skill Cards.”

I picked up the pair of Cards the Slime left behind.

SKILL CARD
ABSORPTION: Use to acquire the Skill Absorption.

SKILL CARD
COMPRESSION: Use to acquire the Skill Compression.

“Uh... Okay?”

I honestly had no idea what that meant. The names were so normal that I couldn’t tell what exactly they did.

They’re Slime drops, though, so they probably suck.

With that, I let the Cards form spheres of light and get sucked into my body.

>You acquired Skill: Absorption. You acquired Skill: Compression.

I decided to use Analysis on them while I was at it.

SKILL DETAILS
ABSORPTION: Allows you to absorb anything and turn its strength into your own. Anything you eat is digested with perfect efficiency. If you activate this Skill when receiving damage, you take no damage, and the absorbed force is added to your strength.
COMPRESSION: Allows you to compress anything, including your strength or body. You must be in physical contact with whatever you wish to compress.

“Seriously?! More cheats?!”

What’s the point of me becoming any stronger?! What am I supposed to do with all this strength?! Seriously, Absorption and Mind’s Eye are the most broken combo ever! This is just nuts!

I let out a heavy sigh. “I hate that I’m starting to get used to all these cheats...”

Most people would be over the moon to get powers like this, but I just felt empty and depressed. Maybe there was something wrong with me. Even though I was technically still a human, it felt like I was getting less human-like by the day, and it wasn’t a good feeling.

I let out another resigned sigh before checking the other drops. The next thing I picked up was a clump of translucent goo. Honestly, it felt pretty good in my hands. Eager, I used Greater Analysis on it.

>SLIME JELLY: A smooth and wobbly chunk of a Slime. It has no notable uses. Technically edible.

“Wow, that’s crap!”

How can any monster have such crazy skills but drop such trash?!

I did technically get my answer, though, so that was enough. I chucked it into my Item Box before moving on.

“What’s next?”

The next thing I spotted was a small treasure chest.

“This thing’s really small. I bet there isn’t much in it.”

Opening it, I found a small pouch of coins and a pair of shoes.

“Shoes, huh?”

Perfect. I was getting tired of walking everywhere barefoot.

Taking them out, I found they were a solid blue color and seemed designed for maximum mobility. I didn’t have the first guess as to what they were made of.

Well, it’s a Slime drop... I shouldn’t get my hopes up.

Again, I used Greater Analysis on it.

>AZURE SHOES: Rare equipment. Slightly raises the wearer's Agility. Allows the wearer to take three steps in mid-air at a time. Changes size to fit the wearer.

"Whoa!"

It was still a little weird, but it was much better than I expected.

I don't really want or need an Agility boost, but being able to walk on air? That's sick.

There was only a single pair of shoes in the chest, though.

"Why don't you take these, Saria?" I finally said.

"Huh? Me?"

"Sure. I'm fine going barefoot."

I could just buy shoes in town, after all, and that was assuming we didn't run into any more Slimes before then. I wasn't about to take the only shoes we had when Saria was barefoot.

She hesitated a moment, then nodded. "If you say so, then okay!"

I lined them up for her on the ground, and after hesitating for a moment, she carefully slipped them on.

She blushed slightly, raising the hem of her skirt so I could see her feet more clearly. "Um... How do they look?"

Surprisingly, the blue of the shoes matched her skin tone to a T.

"Wow, they're perfect on you!"

I meant it, too. Between her scarlet hair, snow-white dress, and blue shoes, her attire was simple but fashionable.

She smiled like a flower in bloom, cheeks blushing slightly. "Ehehe! Thank you!"

Now I think I'm turning red...

For the first time, I was glad to be wearing that stupid helmet.

She looks so different from when she's in her gorilla form. Is it just me, or is she almost as cute as a gorilla? It's a little weird, maybe. But I am the Man With A Gorilla Wife!

I hurriedly cleared my throat. "U-Uh... Right, how much money did we get?"

I grabbed the pouch of coins and let them spill out in my hand. All in all, I counted fifty silver coins.

"Yeah, I don't really get what that means anymore."

That much money should be a pretty big deal, but even the Clever Monkeys dropped more.

I just know it'll bite me in the butt if I don't get a better grasp of money soon. I guess that's a problem for after we get to town, though.

As I let out another sigh, a fanfare suddenly rang out.

"Whoa, what?!"

I whipped around in shock, but from how Saria looked at me, I was the only one who could hear it. A moment later, that familiar voice gave me the answer.

> You have levelled up.

.....

.....

.....

"...Level what?"

Chapter 2: Terbelle, The Royal Capital

I'd somehow totally forgotten about level-ups, so it took me a moment to parse what the voice said.

I'm so used to evolving, after all... Wait, does this mean I actually gained a level?

Something about it gave me a bad feeling, so I hurriedly checked my Status.

HIRAGI SEIICHI	
RACE: Human(Human)	
SEX: Male(Male)	
JOB: Nameless Horror(Magic Swordsman)	
AGE: 17(17)	LEVEL: 2(2)
MANA: 216,030(21)	ATTACK: 218,090(21)
DEFENSE: 213,270(21)	AGILITY: 220,270(22)
M-ATTACK: 215,580(21)	M-DEFENSE: 216,680(21)
LUCK: 209,040(20)	APPEARANCE: So Hot I'm Gonna Die (20)
EQUIPMENT: • Quality Shirt • Quality Pants • Quality Undershirt	

• Quality Underwear • Wise Simian’s Chain • Nixie-Cryst Shortsword • Bracelet of the Night • Aterprinceptite Choker • Necklace of Endless Love • Rapier of Festering Hatred • Rapier of Burgeoning Love
UNIQUE SKILLS: • Instant Memorization • Perfect Recollection • Instant Learning • Instant Regeneration • Perfect Loot. Mind’s Eye
SKILLS—OFFENSE: • Cutter Kick • Twin-Fang Strike • Mighty Claw
SKILLS—IMMUNITIES: • Paralysis Immunity • Sleep Immunity • Confusion Immunity • Charm Immunity • Petrification Immunity • Bind Immunity • Poison Immunity • Fatigue Immunity
SKILLS—MOVEMENT: • Flash
SKILLS—SPECIAL: • Greater Analysis • Ultra Compounding • Ultimate-Tier Tool Crafting • Detection • Disguise • Blend-In • Second Sight

• Absorption • Compression
MAGIC: • Daily Magic • Water Magic (Ultimate) • Dark Magic (Ultimate)
SECRET TECHNIQUES: • Gale Thrust • Piercing Light • Flowing Mist
STYLES: • Zeford Duelling Style (Founder)
TITLES: • Stench Virtuoso • Man with a Gorilla Wife • Pinnacle of Existence • Unbounded One • Master of Men
CURRENCY: 1,000,500,000G

“Gah?!”

I coughed blood and collapsed.

I guess my strength really doesn't know any limits... And c'mon, I got a 100k bonus to all stats for one stupid level? Seriously? I guess I shouldn't be surprised why killing a monster 87 levels higher than me only gave me one level-up, but there is no way I'm complaining. No, that's the best part about this... I think my eyes are starting to sweat...

“What even am I?” I muttered.

Saria crouched down beside me. “It's okay, Seiichi. Cheer up!”

“Y-Yeah... You're right.”

She knows just how much this hurts me... I love you, gorilla babe.

Abruptly, I sprang to my feet.

“No point getting down about it now, I guess. Let’s get going!”

“Okay!”

With that, we were underway once more.

※ ※ ※

“Take this!”

SHAKOOM!

Five days had passed since I’d killed that first Slime and not much had happened. We weren’t attacked by bandits, and nothing steamy happened between Saria and me. The only thing that really happened was we got attacked by more Slimes, and sadly, I gained a few more levels. I checked a copy or two of *A Slime’s Life*, but all I learned was what they normally ate. At the end of the day, all I’d really done was vaporized a few more Slimes, and everything else was status quo.

I chucked the latest Slime’s drop items into my Item Box. As an aside, I was already wearing a pair of Azure Shoes.

I sighed. “This is getting so old...”

The Slimes weren’t exactly getting any tougher, so killing them felt like a chore more than anything else.

At that moment, I heard that mysterious voice in my head again, and I was overwhelmed with a sinking feeling.

>You have levelled up. You have reached maximum proficiency with Disguise. You have unlocked Strength Disguise. The range of Detection has increased from 33 feet to 550 yards.

“What did I do to deserve this?!”

Another goddamn level!

I’d killed seventeen Slimes in the past few days and gained nine levels and counting. The level of the Slimes was getting lower the closer we got to town,

so I was also levelling more slowly, but that was good news as far as I was concerned.

With Stats like these, anyone would want to avoid levelling more...

Just a glance at my Status was enough to affirm my worst fears.

HIIRAGI SEIICHI	
RACE: Human(Human)	
SEX: Male(Male)	
JOB: Nameless Horror(Magic Swordsman)	
AGE: 17(17)	LEVEL: 10(10)
MANA: 1,016,030(50)	ATTACK: 1,018,090(50)
DEFENSE: 1,013,270(50).	AGILITY: 1,020,270(50)
M-ATTACK: 1,015,580(50)	M-DEFENSE: 1,016,680(50)
LUCK: 1,009,040(50)	APPEARANCE: So Hot I'm Gonna Die (50)
EQUIPMENT: • Quality Shirt • Quality Pants • Quality Undershirt • Quality Underwear • Wise Simian's Chain • Nixie-Cryst Shortsword • Bracelet of the Night • Aterprinceptite Choker • Necklace of Endless Love • Rapier of Festering Hatred • Rapier of Burgeoning Love	

• Azure Shoes
UNIQUE SKILLS: • Instant Memorization • Perfect Recollection • Instant Learning • Instant Regeneration • Perfect Loot • Mind’s Eye
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SECRET TECHNIQUES: • Gale Thrust • Piercing Light • Flowing Mist
STYLES: • Zeford Duelling Style (Founder)
TITLES: • Stench Virtuoso • Man with a Gorilla Wife • Pinnacle of Existence • Unbounded One • Master of Men
CURRENCY: 1,002,378,000G

“No more! Please, just stop!!”

Who needs Stats over one million?! These aren't Level 10 Stats! Forget that; these aren't human Stats! Seriously, am I human now or not?!

“And you, Strength Disguise! Explain yourself! WHO ARE YOU?!”

At that moment, a translucent screen popped up in front of me as if it was waiting for that question.

“Whoa! What?!”

Casting an uneasy look around me, I started reading it.

>STRENGTH DISGUISE: One of Disguise's effects. Unlike the base Skill, which can only hide the user's appearance, Strength Disguise allows you to cloak your aura and limit your true strength. However, utilizing this effect removes Disguise's Appearance-changing effects.

“Uh... what?”

So I can do that manga thing where I only use a tenth of my true power and hide my aura and shit? Does that mean I can fight Slimes without totally vaporizing them?

.....

“HELL YEAHH!” I started punching the air.

Finally! Finally, I can act like a real, normal human! Sure, most people wouldn't care about a Skill like this, but now I can actually hold back!

For once, I felt like I didn't have to worry about my stupidly high stats.

“But that range increase on Detection... isn't that a little overkill?”

I mean, going from two and a half yards to over five hundred? That's nuts.

It wasn't a combat Skill, though, so I wasn't going to sweat it that much. In fact, that could only help me down the road.

Saria seemed to notice my happiness and walked up to me with a puzzled look on her face.

“Guess what, Saria?! I can be like a normal human now!”

“Huh?” She blinked at me in confusion, then beamed. “I don't get it, but yay!”

I could feel a weight lift from my shoulders.

As we celebrated, Saria's expression suddenly changed to shock.

“What? What's wrong?”

“Seiichi, your weird hat!”

“My hat...? The helmet?”

Saria nodded firmly.

What's wrong with it?

“It's glowing!”

“Huh, imagine that... Wait, what?!”

Glowing? Why? How?



From how Saria stared at me, I figured it had to be serious. It was only us there, so I should be able to remove it with no problem.

“Let’s see...”

Slowly, I took it off.

“Crap, it *is* glowing!”

Wow, this thing’s blinding! How’s it doing that?

Fortunately, it was a very gentle, relaxing light, so it didn’t hurt my eyes in the least.

SHIIIIINE!

“My eyes... MY EEEEEEEEEYES! I CAN’T SEE!”

Saria and I were both blinded on the spot, and I dropped it.

That was a rotten trick! And c’mon, can everything just please stop hurting my eyes?! What... is the whole damn world in on this blinding-people fad?!

It took a solid few minutes before my eyes were healed enough to see again, but they still hurt like hell.

“Ugh... That stings...”

“Owie...”

However, the first thing I saw after opening my eyes wasn’t what I was expecting.

“What the what?”

Lying on the ground in front of me, right where the helmet should’ve been, was a weird-looking piece of cloth. I cautiously edged towards it and picked it up.

“Yeah, this is a robe now.”

It was jet-black, and it didn’t have any designs or embroidery on it or anything.

“Okay, seriously, what happened? Where’d the helmet go?”

As I spread it out to take a look, a slip of white paper fell out.

Saria pointed it out to me. “What’s that, Seiichi?”

“Beats me.” I picked it up and unfolded it. It looked like a letter.

Hello there. It’s me, Sheep-san.

“You again?!” After realizing I had just yelled at a letter, I cleared my throat. “That dumb sheep sent us a letter?”

First of all, I would like to congratulate you on your newly gained levels. You’re becoming less human by the day.

“Oh, stuff it, lamb chops!”

How does he know about that, anyways?!

I kept reading.

Now, I imagine you’re feeling rather confused about what happened to your beloved helmet just now. If you’ll recall, I told you when I gave it to you that you would be able to remove it eventually. Since the helmet has transformed into a robe, that time has come. That blinding light you witnessed was ‘evolving’ into its next stage.

“Wait, next what?!”

How’s a helmet supposed to evolve, anyways?! Where do I even start?!

The letter went on.

You see, the helmet is set to evolve naturally when you have levelled up enough to achieve maximum proficiency with Disguise. I knew full well that its effects would change as you grew, after all.

That made sense. I still didn’t understand how that sheep could tell, though.

With Disguise’s upgrade, your appearance will return to the way it should be. To put it bluntly, you have no need for the helmet now.

“Yeah, I don’t think I ever needed it.”

I bet that wool-for-brains was just killing time. Man, I hate that guy.

The letter wasn’t over.

However, with your present look, you'll find yourself in trouble unless you take some means to conceal your appearance. As such, I've prepared this perfectly innocuous robe for you. As wearing a robe simply marks you as a mage in this world, you won't be questioned by the town guards for seeming suspicious.

Again, that made sense. If nothing else, it was about a hundred times better than a motorcycle helmet.

The robe will hide your true appearance, but I'm afraid it doesn't come with any additional properties. Let me repeat myself: it is otherwise a perfectly ordinary piece of cloth.

It didn't evolve, then! If anything, it devolved! Even though it looks better, I guess.

"Man, this sheep keeps throwing me off..."

The way he was almost too polite came across as condescending, but somehow, it felt somewhat warm and kind.

Sheep are made of 50% kindness, you know.

"Wait, this is a letter, right?!"

How's it reading my mind like that?! The hell's going on here?!

I kept reading.

At any rate, you have quite the long and winding road ahead of you, so I'll leave you and your new robe to it. I pray for your safety. Love, your sheep.

"Yeah, I'm still not following..."

'Love'? Don't make me sick, you little creep!

Saria peeked over my shoulder at the letter. "So what's it say?"

"Basically, the helmet's a robe, and my life's gonna suck."

"Why?"

Don't ask me; I don't get it either.

To be fair, my explanation was a little oversimplified.

"Oh, whatever. C'mon, let's get going."

I threw the robe on and pulled up the hood.

“Wow, Seiichi!” Her eyes glittered. “You look so cool in that!”

“Thanks.”

Wait, this is weird. Is it just me, or does she compliment me like that no matter what I do? To be fair, though, she’s cute no matter what she does... so long as she doesn’t go gorilla mode in my shirt again.

With that, we set off once again.

※ ※ ※

“Look at that!”

“It’s a town, Seiichi! I see a town!”

The next day, we could spot a decent-sized city on the horizon.

“I guess Zeanos was right.”

I was a little worried since he’d lived 1500 years ago, but fortunately, the town was still there. I let out a sigh of relief.

“That’s pretty amazing...”

Saria turned to me. “Hm? What is?”

“No, it’s just that we’ve been following Zeanos’ memories this whole time.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Just think about it. That town’s been there, in the same place, for 1500 years. That’s crazy.”

The name of the town might be different now, and there was no telling which country it is a part of now. But people had been living there for generation upon generation all the same. Just thinking about it was dizzying.

“I guess it’s weird for humans, huh?” Saria got a faraway look in her eyes. “We monsters don’t really do that, though. We don’t have houses or anything. We just live wherever feels right.” She smiled sadly. “We go wherever there’s

food and stay there until someone bigger and badder comes along. I'm glad I stayed in that forest as long as I did, though."

"Why's that?"

"Well, it was dangerous. I had to fight stuff stronger than I was and run away a few times. But in the end, that place just felt too much like home."

I guess that forest really meant a lot to her, huh... I bet she has a lot of memories there.

I suddenly felt very uncomfortable.

"Are you sure about leaving?" I asked. "You could still go back, y'know."

"Nope!" She shook her head firmly, then smiled warmly at me. "My place is with you, remember? Besides, the number one reason I'm so happy I stayed there was because I got to meet you!"

"O-Okay..."

Holy crap. Wh-What do I say to that? How can she say something like that with a straight face? Man, have I got a thing for her.

I was glad my hood covered my face so well. I didn't want her to see how hard I was blushing.

"A-Alright, uh, let's go!"

"Okay!"

She nodded energetically as if nothing had happened, and we started walking again.

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A short while later, we arrived at the gates safe and sound.

"Holy crap, that's huge!"

"Yeah! It's soooo big!"

The massive wall around the town had to be well over thirty feet tall, and the gates were made from thick cast iron.

How'd they even make a gate that big? Why would they even need it? There's gotta be some reason, but still...

I cast a quick look around us. "I guess the real question is what we're gonna do now, though."

A guard was standing at the gate, and he stopped everyone passing through one by one to talk with them.

"You think he's like the customs guy?"

Saria nodded. "Probably."

Wait, how does she know about customs and the like? Do monsters have stuff like that, too?

At that moment, I was struck with a sudden realization, something critically important that had somehow totally slipped my mind until then.

"What's Saria's Race?!"

Holy crap, this is bad! That guard's going to check her Status, right? I've got Disguise, so I'll be fine. He won't ask for ID, right? If he does, we can just go grab one at the guild, right?

"Anyhow, Saria!"

She blinked at me. "What?"

"What's your Race right now?"

"Huh?" Realization dawned on her. "Oh."

If her Race showed up as Kaiser Kong, that'd be a huge deal. We might get swarmed by every guard in the whole town.

"Right, duh! I'll just use Analysis on you and check."

I hesitated. I couldn't use Analysis on Aoyama back in class because his level was too high, so I could only see his name. It might be the same with Saria now.

I'm technically a nameless horror, right? That's nothing I'd be proud of normally, but it might actually save our asses here. After all, I could use Analysis on Zeanos, so I'm sure it'll pan out!

With that, I put my plan into action.

“Greater Analysis!” I yelled for no reason in particular.

SARIA	
RACE: Gorilla(Beastkin)	
SEX: Female(Female)	
JOB: Pugilist(Pugilist)	
AGE: 17(17)	LEVEL: 775(7)
MANA: 10,000(30)	ATTACK: 30,000(30)
DEFENSE: 20,000(30)	AGILITY: 30,000(30)
M-ATTACK: 5,000(50)	M-DEFENSE: 5,000(50)
LUCK: 100,000(100)	APPEARANCE: Immeasurable(100)

“What?!”

That’s nuts! I mean, those Stats are crazy! How come she gets an Appearance of ‘immeasurable’ in the good sense, though? Lucky! And her Race is Gorilla?!

More importantly, it looked like the numbers in brackets were her Stats in human form, even though it looked a little... skewed.

So she’s a Pugilist, huh? I guess that technically fits since she just punches stuff as a gorilla.

I was a little confused as to why I couldn’t see any of her Skills, but I’d have enough time to figure that out later.

I let out a sigh of relief. “Good... Looks like you’re a beastkin, Saria.”

“Beastkin? What’s that?”

“Uh... A type of demihuman, I think.”

That was what it said in the book God gave me, at least.

“Anyhow, we should be able to get past the guard just fine.”

“Great! Let’s go, then!” She grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the line.

“S-Slow down!”

Once in the line, it didn’t take long for it to be our turn.

“Next!” called the guard.

“Uh... H-Hi,” I stammered.

Saria smiled at him. “Hello there!”

Wow, am I a mess or what?

The guard’s eyes bulged at Saria. “Whoa, you’re a looker!”

He was wearing a shiny silver breastplate and had a longsword hanging from his hip. His beard was scraggly, and his hair was every bit as messy, but I could tell from the look in his eyes that he wasn’t a slob at his job.

I guess it’s rude to call him a slob, but look at the guy!

After a moment, he seemed to come to his senses. “I guess I’m on the clock still... Alright, gimme your papers.”

I knew he was going to ask that! We’re so screwed!

Panicking about it wasn’t going to get us anywhere, though, so I decided to be as up-front about it as possible.

“Sorry,” I said. “We don’t have any ID or anything.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t? How’s that? Didn’t you get one when you were born? Even slaves have ‘em.”

“Uh... right. We lost ours.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “Yeah, I guess that happens.”

Wait, it does?!

He beckoned over another guard and whispered something in his ear. The second guard nodded and ran off somewhere.

“Wait here a minute. We’ll get an Orb of Truth right out.”

I cocked my head to the side. “A what?”

The guard sighed, narrowing his eyes at me slightly. He clearly wasn’t amused.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“C’mon, I’m not kidding anyone. So is it a magic hard candy or something?”

“It’s not food, dumbass!”

Yeah, I know. I was just messing around.

The guard rolled his eyes. “The Orb will let us see if you have a criminal record or anything.”

“Wow, that’s handy.”

“Sure is!” He puffed his chest out a little. “The guy who made it was a genius! Lived a long time ago, though. Look, there it is now.”

He pointed out his friend, who ran over to us with a crystal ball the size of a basketball.

“Alright,” he said, “just put your hands on it.”

“Okay,” I replied. “I guess I’ll go first.”

Saria smiled. “Sure!”

With that, I touched the orb, which started giving off a faint blue light.

The guard nodded. “Good, you’re clear. Now your turn, girlie.”

“Okay!”

She touched it, and just like it did with me, it gave off a blue light.

“Okay, you’re both clean. Since you don’t have any ID, we’ll have to charge an entrance fee of two silver pieces, one per head.”

“Makes sense.” I fished out the coins and handed them to him. “Here you go.”

“Right, that’s it.” After checking the fare, he looked back up at me with a questioning look. “By the way, you don’t have any other clothes, do you?”

“Huh?” I blinked in surprise.

“Your lady friend sticks out in a good way, ‘course, but you’re dressed like a real weirdo. Don’t try anything funny, alright?”

“O-Okay.”

That woolly little jerk! He tricked me again! This robe’s still better than that helmet, though.

I was a little surprised he didn’t look at our Status, but I wasn’t complaining.

The guard continued, “You should also get yourselves some new ID soon.”

“About that... We’re planning on registering at the adventurer’s guild, so we’ll probably be fine with that ID alone.”

They’ll give us ID, right? I really hope they will.

The guard, however, just looked at me like I was totally nuts.

Huh? What’d I say?



“Y-You’re gonna register at the guild? Seriously?!”

I nodded hesitantly. “Uh... Yeah?”

He grabbed me roughly by the shoulders, staring right into my eyes.

“Trust me, stay the hell away from there! You’re too normal to stand it!”

“Okay, seriously, what’s wrong with you?!”

I’m ‘too normal?’ What does that mean?!

“Why’d you have to come to this town’s guild?!” He was hysterical. “Why here?!”

“Uh... I just...”

“You ‘just’ nothing!”

“H-Huh?”

It’s the closest guild, so it’s not like we have much choice. Seriously, though, what’s this guy’s problem?

“Dammit!” the guard cursed, tears streaming down his face. “To think that hellhole will claim another victim... I’m a failure to the people!”

“Wait, back up a second there. Victim?!”

What kind of victim are we talking about here?!

I could feel my uneasiness growing as the guard gave Saria and me a serious look.

“Listen up, you two. If you run into any trouble, come right back here to me, okay? I’ll hear you out, no matter what you need to get off your chests. And don’t go making any hasty decisions, alright?”

“Uh...”

“Alright?!”

“O-Okay!” Saria and I replied in unison.

“Good!” He let out a sigh of relief. “Sorry, I guess I haven’t introduced myself. The name’s Claude Schraizer. Just call me Claude, okay? No need to get formal

with me or anything.”

I nodded. “Alright, nice to meet you. My name’s Seiichi.”

“I’m Saria! It’s a pleasure!”

He smiled warmly at us. “The pleasure’s mine! Right, then, from the top...”

Claude took a deep breath, then dramatically waved us through the gate.

“Welcome to the Royal Capital, Terbelle!”

Chapter 3: The Guild

“Whoa!”

As we passed through the town gates, I couldn’t help but gasp.

“C-Catgirls?! Impossible!”

I could spot a few people with cat ears and tails wandering through the crowd.

They must be cat beastkin, I guess... Maybe I’ll see a real-life catgirl maid soon!

“There’re so many different kinds of people, huh.”

There were other kinds of beastkin mixed in with the crowd, too. I’d known they existed before now, of course, but seeing them in the flesh was a whole different kettle of fish.

“Look, Seiichi!” Saria energetically tugged on my sleeve, pointing at a stall by the roadside. “Whatever they’re selling there smells really good!”

I followed where she was pointing to see a yakisoba stall.

“Yeah, you’re right. Come to think of it, we didn’t have a decent meal the whole trip here.”

All that we had were the simple rations Sheep-san gave us. Now that we were in town, we’d have the chance to buy some ingredients and do some proper cooking.

Not that I can cook, of course.

After a minute or two of walking, I noticed something interesting.

“Why doesn’t anyone else here have black hair?” I muttered.

No matter how hard I looked, I didn’t see anyone.

“Huh?” Saria glanced around. “I guess you’re right.”

Is black hair that rare in this world?

Most of my classmates also had black hair, so maybe if I walked around with my hood down, people would start thinking I was one of the heroes, too.

Maybe it's not super likely, but there's no way I'm risking that.

They'd probably boot me right into the closest battlefield if they figured out I was summoned here. We were summoned here to defeat the Demon King, after all.

Wait, I used my real name with Claude, didn't I?

Seiichi should be a rare name in this world. Since he didn't raise a fuss about it, he must have only thought it was a little unusual. I had plenty of questions, but the biggest one was about what had happened to Kenji and the others. They were probably just fine, but just in case, I'd poke around later to see if there were any rumors about a group of summoned heroes later.

"I guess I won't be taking the robe off anytime soon, though."

Saria looked confused. "Why?"

"Well... several reasons, actually."

The biggest problem was with Disguise. At first, it could change how I appeared physically, which was fine. But up against anyone even decently strong, they would've been able to see right through me. Now, with Strength Disguise, I wouldn't have to worry about that—but if I was right, I couldn't change how I looked now. Of course, I didn't know if I could use it to turn blonde or anything, but it would've been more useful in town the way it was before.

I just hope I don't run into too much trouble.

As I was getting lost in thought, Saria tugged on my hand.

"Hm? What's up?"

"That's what I want to ask! How long are we going to stand here?"

"Oh, right."

For the first time, I realized we'd barely taken a single step since entering the town. People were passing us left and right from behind, and we would probably just be more in the way the longer we stood there.

"Sorry. Let's get going, then."

"Okay!"

We started walking, but I broke the silence a moment later.

"How about we grab something at one of those stalls?" I offered.

"I am getting kind of hungry... Let's do it!"

"Alright."

With that, we turned our attention to the vendors at the roadside.

"It sure is lively here," I remarked.

Saria nodded. "Yeah! Everyone looks so happy, too!"

Looking around, I could see she was right. The crowd around us was all smiles. I could tell that Saria was attracting quite a bit of attention from passersby, especially the men and some women. Most of them were staring as if they were looking at a goddess. She was pretty cute, after all. And when they noticed that some robed weirdo was with her, they looked downright baffled.

Let's just be extra clear here, especially all you guys. She's a gorilla.

With that, I turned my focus back to the town around us.

"I wonder if the whole country's this happy or if it's just this place?" I wondered aloud. "Either way, I guess it's nothing to complain about."

"Yeah! It's a good thing!"

Just walking through such a lively town was refreshing.

It wasn't called Terbelle back in Zeanos' day, so who knows what country we're in now. I'm kinda curious...

"Hm?" One of the buildings along the road caught my attention. It was a tall, imposing building decorated in whites and blues. "Is that a church? I wonder what kind of religion they have here?"

I was curious, but we had more important business to attend to, so I didn't pay it much mind.

Along the way, we also spotted a giant castle that fit the descriptor of 'Royal Capital' well. Saria and I spent a good minute or two gawking at it. Not long after, we found a vendor that we both liked the look of, so we stopped there to grab a bite.

Saria's eyes sparkled. "Look, Seiichi! Doesn't this look amazing?!"

It looked a lot like fried chicken, but according to the guy at the stall, it was made from a kind of monster called an Abbuck. No relation to the common Earth chicken, I was sure. Saria and I continued walking as we munched away. At first, it was too hot for me to tell the flavor, but as it cooled down, I could tell just how good it was.

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By the time we finished eating, we were nearly at our destination.

I looked around. "Let's see... Claude said the guild should be right around here..."

"I wonder what it'll be like?"

Especially now that we were so close to our destination, though, I was starting to get uneasy, especially after seeing Claude flip out like that.

I really hope it's not as bad as he made it sound.

Finally, we reached the end of the path Claude had directed us to, and we found a wooden building with a red roof before our eyes.

I swallowed hard. "This is it, right?"

Saria nodded. "I think so."

There was a sign out front with a sword and a shield on it, and 'Guild' was written in giant letters on the side of the building at about the second-story mark. It was a fairly large building, but the wooden double doors in the front looked like anyone could pop them open and head right in.

“...It’s not too late to leave, right?”

Now that it was right in front of us, my feet felt rooted to the spot. The building was well kept, all things considered, but it felt every bit as intimidating as some horrific monster’s cave. I even thought I could faintly hear something like screaming from somewhere inside. We couldn’t just stand outside forever, though, and there was no way I would let Saria go in first if there was any chance it’d be dangerous.

I took a deep breath and pushed the doors open. The first thing I saw was a woman decked out in black leather BDSM gear whipping a guy in dirty leather armor. He was hog-tied, of course.

“Squeal for me, you filthy little piglet!” the woman shouted. “Let the whole world hear you!”

The man panted heavily. “M-More... More! OINKA OINKA!”

I wordlessly closed the doors.

“.....”

I then double-checked the sign to ensure we were in the right place.

“Yeah... Yeah, this is the guild alright.”

My nerves must be getting to me... no way I saw what I thought I just saw.

The guild was a professional place for business, after all. It wasn’t a place for perverts.

I opened the doors again. This time, the dominatrix was stomping on the guy.

“K-Keep going... Step on me more!”

She raised an irritated eyebrow. “Why, you rude little boy! Didn’t your mommy teach you to say please?”

“P-Pleeeeeeease! Please, mommyyyyyy!”

I looked away from them. In another corner of the room, a ripped guy was swinging a chair over his head like a madman.

“Lemme break shit! I don’t care what; I just gotta break more shit!”

A guy close to him sighed and nudged his friend. “Hey, Grande’s gone nuts again. Go stop him.”

The friend shrugged him off. “You do it. This town’s got a lot of beauties, and somebody’s gotta rank and catalogue them all.”

At another table, I could see a pair of gentlemen greeting each other as though all this was normal.

“Why, if it isn’t Slan-shi!” the first exclaimed. “About to head out, are you?”

The second Slan nodded. “Naturally. This is perfect weather for a bit of flashing, after all! I daresay I’ll run nude through the market.”

“Good luck with that, friend. I’ll be protecting the little girls in the park from the shadows, of course. Oh, what I’d give to be their friend...”

“Hahaha! Same as always, I see!”

“Let’s both take care to not attract any guards this time, shall we?”

Slan nodded. “Naturally! Why, to trouble the guards daily would be a blemish on my pride as a gentleman!”

I silently closed the door.

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“Holy *shit*, they’re just a bunch of perverted freaks!” It didn’t even matter that this was a busy street; I couldn’t hold it in any longer. “I mean, seriously?! Nononono, no way! I can’t believe it! How are they all such total lunatics?!”

I mean, c’mon! Just at a glance, there was a sadist, a masochist, a vandal, a plain-old creep, a nudist, and a lolicon—all in the first minute! And how often do they get caught by the guards exactly?!

Saria gave me a worried look. “Are you okay, Seiichi? You’re yelling a lot.”

Looking around, a lot of passersby were also stopping to shoot me concerned looks. As soon as they realized I was right in front of the guild, they seemed to ‘understand’ and went right on their way without giving me another thought.

Wait, hold up! I’m not a freak like them, honest!

“Ahh... Suddenly, everything Claude said makes sense.”

I mean, signing up at a zoo like that? Hell, I'd stop me if I knew.

"So, are we going in?" Saria asked.

"Nope. No way. We'll have to get our IDs somewhere else."

"Huh? Why?"

"We can't get it done here. Just give up on it, okay?"

"Hm?" She cocked her head to the side cutely.

Like I'd expose her to a bunch of creeps like that!

"Anyhow, we'd better get moving. I'm sure we can find work somewh—"

A man's voice suddenly boomed out from right behind me. "There's no need for that!"

I whipped around to find a mountain of a man standing there. He was tanned, covered in huge rippling muscles, and wearing nothing but a tight little speedo. From his face, I could tell he was probably in his mid-forties. There was plenty to process all at once, but one question rose above the rest.

"Uh... Who're you?"

He grinned, showing off a row of gleaming white teeth, and spread his arms wide. "Why, I'm master of the Terbelle Guild! That's me, Guildmaster Gustle Clout! You can just call me Gustle!" He flexed, and his massive biceps danced.

Uh... Yeah, one more quick question.

"Why aren't you wearing any clothes?!"

Seriously, is there anyone at this guild who isn't a total perv?! And c'mon, first, that sheep's motorcycle helmet, and now a speedo?! This fantasy world's got some shit-tier world-building issues!

Even Saria seemed a little put off by Gustle's introduction. His expression soured a little as he shook his head at me.

"That's a dumb question, kid. If I was wearing clothes, you wouldn't be able to see my muscles! C'mon, that's common sense!"

"Common sense? What, so I'm the weird one here?!"

Please let him be wrong. I'd like to think my common sense still works here.

Gustle ignored me. "Anyhow, I overheard you two earlier. You want to register at the guild, do you?"

"Uh, no. We just decided to try somewhere else."

"Oh, c'mon! We'll give you a warm welcome as our new brother and sister!"

"I just said we weren't interested."

"Enough standing around out here, though. Why don't we go over the details inside?"

"Or maybe you could listen to me?!"

Unfortunately, my words didn't seem to get through his thick skull, and Saria and I were half-dragged inside. My third look inside wasn't any improvement on the first two times, and Saria's eyes were wide as she took it all in. She eagerly pointed at the BDSM couple.

"Hey, Seiichi! What're they doing?"

"Shh! Don't look at them! Keep walking!"

I never wanted to have to do this.

None of the 'adventurers' at the guild paid us any mind, though; they all seemed stuck in their own weird little worlds. I let out a heavy sigh as we arrived at the counter.

They're all done for. We're done for. It's over. I've gotta do something.

"Alright," Gustle announced, "you can register here!"

"No thanks! We don't want any part of this freakshow!"

"What?! But if you register, you can have a body just like mine! Look! Look at these MUSCLES!" He started flexing at me.

I don't even know where to start with this guy. It makes sense that he'd run a balls-to-the-wall crazy place like this, though.

He finally seemed to realize just how 'excited' I was to be there, and he drooped like a sad puppy.

“Oh... Well, if you’re sure. It’s a real pity, though. We’ve got all sorts of special perks and the like here.”

“Sure you do.”

“Oh, but we do.” He glanced at me once to see if I was hooked yet before going back to moping with a sad sigh. “We’ve got partnerships with a few snuggly-safe inns around, giving you special discount prices on rooms and meals. We also offer promotions with stores and blacksmiths in this country and the neighbors, including freebies. Oh, and we offer a tailored request service to make you get the work that suits you best. No other guild goes that far for its members, y’know...”

Man, I wish I could just punch this guy.

“We’ve got plenty of money, thanks,” I replied coolly. “You won’t hook us on freebies or whatever. Besides, all guilds around here offer the same kind of bonuses, right?”

“Ah, I can tell you don’t get just how special this place is!”

“Oh, I know it’s ‘special,’ alright.”

“Just take a look around you!” He gestured out at the chaotic mob of deviants. “Have you ever seen a group of people look so alive? Know why that is?”

“Nope, and I really don’t care.”

“It’s because they’re true to their desires!”

“No shit, Sherlock!”

Honestly, you’d have to be some kind of saint to put up with all this.

“I’ll have you know we’re some of the best in the business,” Gustle boasted. “We’re the only guild that has relations with other countries, y’know!”

“I heard you’ve got ‘relations’ with the guards, too.”

He puffed out his massive chest with pride. “They call us their special friends!”

“That’s not a good thing!”

“But really,” he continued, “we are the best. Did you know every S-Rank adventurer in the business started out here?”

“Huh. I guess the ‘S’ must stand for ‘sex-crazed’ or something.”

Do they get some kind of dark power from their perversions or something?

“Stop sweating the details already! Just sign up already, and you can have a nice, beefy bod like me!”

“That’s another reason to *not* sign up.”

“Oh, I see. You don’t care that we’re always on the cutting edge of world news either, eh? Information is an adventurer’s lifeblood, y’know.”

I paused, swayed for the first time. “How is that?”

“We’re not just any guild, after all. We’re Guild HQ.”

My eyes opened wide. “What?!”

Seriously?! How?!

“You mean...this group of freaks is the main guild? Like, internationally? This whole world’s doomed.”

Gustle narrowed his eyes a little. “You can be pretty rude sometimes, kid.”

“Just shut up, freak.”

He grinned and popped his pecs. “How harsh!”

Yeah, he’s taking it real hard. What a weirdo.

“If this really is the Guild HQ, then that changes things.”

I could probably get information about my classmates easily, which would be a game-changer. After all, I didn’t doubt their connections, and it’d be a lot quicker and easier than sniffing out rumors myself. Registering here might not be that bad.

“I just hope people don’t think I’m a pervert, too.”

I guess I’ve got plenty of freak in my Status, though. I’m not really human, so I shouldn’t complain.

“Be bold, kid! Be decisive! So? What’ll it be?”

And there's the million-dollar question.

As I mulled it over, though, Saria tugged on my sleeve.

"Hey, Seiichi?"

"Yeah?"

"I think we should do it."

"Wait, what?"

"It looks like so much fun here! Plus, if it'll help us out, I think it sounds like a good idea."

She had a definite point. I couldn't deny the benefits it could bring us now.

I don't have a problem with everyone having fun, either, but this kind of fun isn't okay! What if we get messed up, too?

I turned back to Gustle. "So only people who register here get the full benefits? Isn't that kind of unfair to all the other guilds?"

He shrugged. "I guess. But anyone who's registered at a branch guild can sign up here, too, and get all the same perks. Just about every adventurer stops by here to register."

"Huh. Okay."

It'd be some extra work, but if we can register at multiple guilds, I guess it wouldn't hurt to sign up here.

"Alright, then. I guess we'll sign up."

Gustle grinned. "I knew you'd come around!" He turned out into the mob. "Hey, Eris-kun! C'mere!"

The dominatrix stopped whipping the masochist and looked up. "Hm? What is it?"

"We've got some folks here looking to sign up. Can you give them a hand with the paperwork?"

"Alright." With that, she walked around the reception counter. Then she paused and looked down at herself. "I suppose this is hardly the proper attire

for a receptionist.”

She snapped her fingers, and in an instant, her bondage gear became a crisp white-and-green receptionist dress.

“I’m dreadfully sorry you had to witness that.” She gave us a light curtsy. “My name is Eris Maclaine, the receptionist here at the guild. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Her drill curls were just the kind of hairstyle I would’ve expected on a noble heiress from some manga, and her eyes were a pretty shade of blue. Looking at her face, she was smack dab between her teenage years and adulthood, and she had smooth, clear skin. She gave off an almost refreshing impression.

She really does look like a noblewoman... It’s amazing how different she looks from just a moment ago.

Gustle smiled at us. “As it happens, Eris-kun here is also Count Maclaine’s daughter.”

“So she *is* a noble!”

What’s she doing working here then, with all these weirdos around?! She was whipping away like a real sadist, too!

Eris narrowed her eyes at Gustle. “Now, Gustle-san, it’s hardly polite to reveal a woman’s secrets like that. Perhaps I should re-educate you?”

His smile instantly disappeared. “Please, anything but that.”

Wow, he’s weak! Or maybe Eris is just that scary? I’m not sure I want to know what she means by ‘re-education’...

“Anyhow,” she smiled as she turned back to Saria and me, “you two would like to register here. Correct?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I replied.

“Excellent. May I ask you to fill out these forms then?”

The form she handed us had all sorts of blanks for everything, from our names to where we were born.

I hesitated. “Do we have to fill in everything?”

“Oh, no. All you need to do is write your name. Everything else is optional.”

Wait, seriously?! Is getting an ID really that easy?

I wasn't going to complain, though, since I couldn't exactly write 'Japan.' I handed Saria her form, and with that, I filled in as much as possible. Fortunately, Saria seemed to have learned to write when she learned to read and had no problems filling out the form. Just in case, I decided to look hers over before handing it back to Eris. If she wrote that she was from the Forest of Endless Heartbreak or something, that could be an issue.

As soon as she finished, I took a peek. “Let's see... your name's right. Your weapon is... wait, your 'smokin' hot fists'?!”

“Ehehe! Doesn't that sound cool?”

Sure, she's a Pugilist, but does she have to put it like that?!

Aside from that, though, there weren't any issues with what she wrote. I handed both our papers back to Eris.

“Allow me to check it over,” she said, turning to Saria. “Let's see... Saria-san, is it? And your weapon is your smokin' hot fists. No issues here, I see.”

Wait, no reaction? Am I just overreacting?

“Your application appears to be in order, Saria-san.” Eris then turned to my form. “You're next, then. Oh, Seiichi-san, I see you're proficient with swords and magic. You're quite the talent, I see.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Not many people can use magic, after all. Of course, I had the feeling you were something of a wizard from how you're dressed.”

“Oh, okay.”

So mages are rare in this world, then? Still, it doesn't sound like I'll stand out as much as Claude seemed to think.

The problem was probably just how I had my hood pulled low over my face. Until I knew more, I didn't want to go around flashing my black hair everywhere.

After she finished reading my application, Eris nodded. “Everything seems to be in order then. Don’t worry; we have many aspiring adventurers who don’t write their place of origin. It looks like you’ll both be able to register without issue.”

Glad we got that out of the way.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Great!” Gustle clapped his hands together. “We can get right on to the entrance exam, then!”

“Huh? Exam?” I gave him a blank look.

“Y’know, the test! With all the member perks and the like we offer, you didn’t think there’d be no vetting process at all, did you?”

“Okay, I officially feel scammed.”

I thought filling out that form was the only step! Would it have killed him to tell us about the exam earlier?!

“Don’t be like that! Be more like my muscles!” He flexed a bulging bicep in my face. “See how perky they are?”

“Uh, no.”

How are muscles supposed to be perky, anyways?

“Anyhow, I’ll explain more about the guild and how we operate as soon as you pass.”

“Fine. So what are we supposed to do? And more importantly, what if we fail?”

“Don’t worry; it’s impossible to fail!”

“Then why is there an exam at all?!”

Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of testing us?

I let out a heavy sigh.

“It’s only an exam in name,” Eris explained. “We simply ask that you complete a few simple requests so that we can properly gauge your capabilities. At the

guild, we divide all requests into hunts, gatherings, errands, and escorts. As such, the test consists of one errand, one hunt, and one gathering request each.”

“Makes sense.”

“As it is technically still an exam, however, we will assign a proctor to you to watch over your progress.”

“A proctor?”

Eris nodded. “In other words, an adventurer of at least B-Rank. Do you happen to know any adventurers that would be available?”

“No, not at all.”

“We’ll arrange one for you then. I’ll check and see who might be available.”

Gustle grinned. “That’s our Eris-kun! Nobody works faster!”

She shot him a dirty look. “I work faster than you, at the very least. You’re nothing more than an incompetent little worm, after all.”

He drooped dejectedly. “Sorry.”

Wow, Eris doesn’t mince her words.

With that, she left to find someone.

“Hey, you!”

The moment we were alone, however, I heard a rough voice call out from right behind me.

Chapter 4: That Old Trope

Quickly, I turned around to see who was trying to get my attention. There, I saw a trio of thugs smirking at me.

“Uh... Can I help you?”

I didn’t want to provoke them, after all. I could hear Eris sigh behind me, and I glanced at Gustle to see him shaking his head.

What’s with these guys? And why are Eris and Gustle reacting like that?

The man in the middle, apparently their leader, sneered at me.

“So you’re gonna take the exam, huh?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“You’re new ‘round here?”

“That’s what taking the exam would mean, yeah.”

The thug’s grin grew wider, and I only got more confused.

Wait, I’m about to get hazed, aren’t I? I remember reading tons of stuff like this. They try to beat the protagonist up, but they end up getting their asses handed to them.

I wasn’t main character material or anything, so maybe they just didn’t like that a beauty like Saria was with me.

The head thug jerked his thumb toward the door. “Let’s take this outside.”

There it is, that line! So it is that trope!

I still wasn’t exactly clear on why, though, and I wanted to have some idea before going any further. I didn’t want to get into a fight without knowing why, at least. I decided to play dumb.

“So what are you going to do to me?”

The leader glanced around. “Nah, I can’t say it here. I’ll tell ya outside.”

“Huh?”

Hold up. What’s going on here? They’re planning on pounding me so hard they can’t even talk about it here? Man, I’m getting chills.

Just thinking about it wasn’t going to get me out of this mess, though, and telling them how scared I was probably wouldn’t help me either.

I guess it couldn’t hurt to refuse nicely.

“Uh... Thanks for the invitation, guys, but I’d really rather not.”

“Hah! As if we’re gonna take no for an answer!”

Huh? They can do that? What happened to my rights?

It didn’t look like I would solve the problem on my own, but fortunately, Gustle was right there. He should be able to shut them right down.

“Hey, Gustle. Tell them to stop bothering me.”

He shrugged. “No can do.”

“What’d you say?!” I couldn’t believe he could just shut me down like that. “C’mon, you’re the Guildmaster, right? Can’t you tell them no?”

“Hahaha! As if I have that kind of authority!”

“Man, you’re useless!”

What’s the point of being Guildmaster if you can’t do a damn thing?! Just retire already!

I turned to Eris. She seemed to have power here, at least. “Please, you’ve got to do something! They’re ganging up on me!”

She gave me an apologetic look. “I’m afraid you’re on your own.”

“Why?!”

Why does everyone want me to just give up so badly?!

I looked around the guild for help, but almost everyone was still stuck in their own little worlds. The few people who had noticed me just shrugged helplessly, unwilling or unable to help.

Seriously, what's going on here? Are these three randos so strong nobody can stand against them or something?!

Eris gave me a small smile. "I've heard it hurts at first, but don't worry. It'll feel good soon enough."

"Wait, what are you talking about?!"

Am I about to have a masochistic awakening or something? I don't want to be into BDSM! It'd be the end of me!

I was dreading going with those guys more by the second.

No, wait. That's assuming they can beat me. I'm pretty much unstoppable with my Stats, right?

I was so OP that they probably wouldn't even be able to scratch me. Since the last thing I wanted was for them to start bugging Saria, I figured I might as well just go with them. Especially if they wanted to go somewhere away from everyone else, it wouldn't be a problem. I didn't want to stand out any more than I already did.

"Alright," I sighed. "I'll go with you."

The thug leader grinned. "That's a good boy!"

Saria took a half step forward. "I-I'll go, too!"

"Stay here with Gustle," I told her as softly as possible. "Don't worry. This will be quick."

She looked up at me with worry. "You can't go alone!"

I was honestly happy she was so concerned for me, but the last thing I wanted was to make trouble for her. Of course, I was probably strong enough to protect her with no problem, and she was strong enough to rip these guys a new one in her gorilla form.

Just as I was starting to reconsider, the thug leader scoffed.

"Stay here, bitch. No getting in our way, now."

My eyes flew open in surprise.

Wait, isn't it supposed to be the other way around? Don't thugs want to take the girl? Like, they want her to see me get all beat up, right?

I had no clue what they wanted at this point, but they weren't waiting around. The three of them were already heading back towards the door. The leader turned back to me and snarled.

"What, you want an invitation?"

"I-I'm coming!"

Just as I started after them, though, I heard Gustle's voice from behind me.

"Just don't lose sight of yourself, kid. You've got Saria-kun to think about."

"Seriously, what's going on here?!"

Shaking my head, I followed the ruffians out of the guild.

After I left, Gustle sighed.

"That's the last we'll see of him, I guess."

"Are you quite certain that was wise?" Eris asked him.

"Hey, what can I do? A man's gotta protect his virginity."

She sighed. "Honestly, you're the worst."

"Hahaha! Anything for my muscles!"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Eris shook her head. "Oh, well. I may as well use this opportunity to find a B-Rank adventurer for them."

Of course, I had no way of knowing they had said anything.

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"Alright, this's it!"

The ruffians finally stopped in a dead-end alleyway someway from the guild. There wasn't any sign that people came here often.

Yep, it's official. I'm gonna get the shit pounded outta me.

I braced myself for a fight as the three men moved to surround me.

The leader smirked at me. “Alright! I betcha know why we brought ya out here, huh?”

“I’m pretty sure, yeah.”

I still didn’t know why they wanted to beat me up so badly. Their biggest mistake was assuming I was some rookie instead of a full-fledged monster.

Upon hearing my reply, the thugs all burst out, grinning. “That’ll speed things up, then. Alright, let the pounding begin!”

The leader stripped off his leather armor, then undid all his shirt buttons at lightning speed. Looking around me, I realized the other thugs were also shirtless now.

Wait, why are they all stripping? Are they ‘getting serious’ or whatever against a newcomer like me? If they take off their equipment for a fight, what’s the point of equipping it in the first place?

The head thug noticed my surprise and shook his head with an irritated sigh.

“What, so ya don’t get it.”

“Uh... Get what?”

“Dammit... Guess we’ll hafta take it from the top.” His face suddenly grew serious, and he looked me dead in the eyes. “We gonna smash or what?”

“Huh?”

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...Wait.

I must’ve misheard him. It sounded like he was referring to the, uh, non-fighting meaning of the word. Hahaha, nah, no way! That’s impossible!

I broke out in a cold sweat.

The lead thug shook his head, then held his unbuttoned shirt open a little more so I could get a better look.

“We gonna do it or what?”

“DAMMIT!”

I heard right! Why would I have to be right?!

Apparently, these gentlemen all batted for the other team. I felt a chill run down my spine, despite how strong I was supposed to be to them.

“Oh, and I’ll eat ya even if ya ain’t interested.”

“NOOOOOOOOO!!”

Somebody, anybody, save me!

I stared frantically, looking for help, but there wasn’t anyone else around.

“C’mon, don’t be like that. It only hurts at first. I’ll get ya feelin’ real good soon enough.”

“Seriously, cut that out! I don’t swing that way!”

He shook his head. “That’s what they all say. All you’re doing is lyin’ to yourself, man. Look at these guys! They were just like you!”

They both grinned at me. “You got a nice ass!”

“Oh God, you’re victims, too!”

They’re too far gone. This whole guild is rotten to the core! I’ve gotta get the hell outta here now!

The guilds in other countries probably weren’t full of perverts like this one. Claude had tried to warn me and everything if only I’d listened.

No, there’s enough time for regrets later! For now, I’ve gotta survive!

I frantically looked around for an escape route, but everywhere I looked, there were men with grasping hands, drooling mouths, and thrusting hips. It was worse than any horror movie I’d ever seen before in my life. I tried to back away, but my back hit the hard, cold wall of a building.

The leader grinned. “Ya shouldn’t have come if ya didn’t wanna get pounded. Brace yourself!”

“Nooooo!”

Think, me, think! How do I get outta this?! No, there's only one way... I've gotta break through with force!

With that, I released the font of power inside me. I probably didn't look any different, thanks to Strength Disguise, but now I had full access to my insane Stats. I knew what I had to do now.

"Sorry, gotta run!"

"Huh?!"

I ran straight up the wall behind me.

Fight? Sorry, I literally just can't.

After all, even if I beat them to pulps, I didn't want any weird rumors going around. It took a few long seconds to realize what I was doing.

Wait, I'm running up a wall? That's... wrong.

Even though I was thoroughly disgusting myself, I could hear the thugs on the ground below me.

"Damn, look at those legs! Think what his thighs must be like!"

"Stand back, boys, his body's mine!"

"Don't let him get away! After him!"

Yeah, I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear them.

I hopped from rooftop to rooftop, trying to stay out of sight as much as possible, and before long, I was back at the guild.

"I bet they'll come back here soon, though..."

As long as we were in this country, I'd probably run into those three again. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to relax.

"Man, I hate this place."

Just for the record, I'm straight as straight can be, honest. Trust me on this.

There wasn't much point in just moping around outside, so I decided to head into the guild. Inside, it was every bit as chaotic and deviant-packed as before. I

knew that getting worked up about it now was pointless, so I walked right up to Gustle and the others.

Gustle gave me a surprised look. "You're alright?"

Eris let out a sigh of relief. "That's rather nice to see."

"Yeah, I made it out okay. I get why you both just told me to give up, though."

Gustle nodded gravely. "I see. They try that sort of thing every time a new male adventurer comes by, so I'd recommend you watch out moving forward."

"Or, I dunno, you could stop them?"

"I have, many times." He shivered. "Unfortunately, if I remind them too often, it's my ass on the line."

I can't blame him. No man could fight those creeps head-on. I can just imagine they'd try to cop a feel mid-fight...

"But I won't give up!" Gustle flexed. "One day, they'll bow to the might of my muscles!"

I grimaced. "Good luck with that."

Just then, I felt a tug at my robe, and I turned to see Saria there.

"Are you okay, Seiichi?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I stroked her hair, fingering the silky strands as my hand passed through them. "I hope you didn't worry too much."

Saria squirmed a little as though my touch was a little ticklish, but she narrowed her eyes in pleasure all the same.

Holy shit! Is she cute? I get the feeling I'm in lovey-dovey couple mode any time she's with me.

Especially after a scare like that, I was glad to have her with me. With her, it felt like everything would be alright.

As we were getting lost in our little world, Eris cleared her throat.

"Seiichi-san? About your test."

"Oh, right."

“I just thought I should let you know that I looked into what adventurers we have available to observe you. And I’m afraid I have some unfortunate news.”

“What is it?”

Eris hesitated, and eventually, Gustle cut in to answer for her. “Well... You and Saria are new to this country, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Yeah, we are.”

What does that have to do with anything?

“It happens that we only have one adventurer here of B-Rank or higher.”

“Great! Can’t they do it, then? What’s the problem?”

Gustle scratched his head. “There’s no problem, but, uh... Eris-kun?”

Eris sighed. “I suppose we don’t have much choice, do we?”

“What?”

Okay, seriously, what is it this time here?

Saria looked every bit as confused as I was.

Wait, don’t tell me it’s one of those perverts from the alley?! I’ll sprint right out of the country, don’t think I won’t.

I shuddered.

“I guess we’ll have to call her...” Gustle turned to face the chaos of the room. “Altria-kun! Altria-kuuuuun!”

The entire guild was suddenly dead silent. Every adventurer there was frozen to the spot, nothing like when I was confronted by those nutjobs. Then, they slowly turned all at once to look at a figure standing alone in front of the bulletin board. Altria Grem had silver hair cut roughly at shoulder-length, and she was dressed in short sleeves and shorts. Her chest protector and gauntlets were made of a material I’d never seen before. Saria and I were struck speechless.



“Whoa...”

“She’s so pretty!”

Her eyes had an almost predatory light to them like she was some wild animal. Her skin was healthily tanned, and I could tell even from where I stood that she was tall for a woman. What attracted my gaze the most was how her chest struggled and bulged against her armor. Basically, she was a really hot-tanned chick.

“What?” She glared at Gustle as she walked over to us. She didn’t seem happy to be bothered.

Gustle seemed unfazed. “We’ve got some new recruits, and I’d like you to oversee their entrance exams.”

“Just get someone else to do it. You know I can’t.”

“Yeah, I know... But you’re the only adventurer here who can do it. They can’t get their guild cards without the test.”

Wow, she even sounds cool... Wait, why can’t she?

“Just have ‘em wait until someone else gets back. Don’t make me do it, okay?”

Gustle hesitated. “Well, about that...”

“I’m afraid you’re the only adventurer in the country at the moment,” Eris cut in. “Even the closest adventurer isn’t slated to return for over a month, and there aren’t any C-Rank adventurers due for a promotion soon.”

Altria was quiet for a long moment. Then she shot me a hard look.

“Hey, newbie. You don’t want me to oversee your test, right?”

“Huh? Why wouldn’t I?”

Her eyes flew open with shock. “Shit... You guys are insane, aren’t you?”

“Uh... I don’t think so? Right, Saria?”

Saria smiled. “Of course, we aren’t!”

Altria seemed to get only more confused, and Gustle leaned in to whisper in her ear.

“They’re new to this country. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve never heard of you.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Really? I’m A-Rank. You’d think they’d hear the rumors.”

“Oh, don’t be like that! Why don’t you give it a try?”

“But—”

“They might be fine with your condition, y’know.”

That seemed to take the words right out of her mouth.

What condition? Seriously, what are we missing here?

It was a good few seconds before she could reply in a low and growling voice, “What makes you think they’ll be alright?”

Gustle grinned back at her. “My muscles told me so! What, do I need some other reason? No, nobody does! It’s the best reason!”

Uh, no. I’d say that has to be one of the worst reasons ever. I don’t think I’d even call that a reason at all.

I rolled my eyes at Gustle, but Altria seemed to take him seriously enough. She sighed and sat down at the closest chair.

“Fine, you win. I’ll babysit them for their test, okay?”

How did that work?!

One way or another, it looked like we’d be able to take the exam after all.

Altria shot Saria and me a frosty look.

“The name’s Altria Grem...”

Somewhere in her eyes, I could see a deep sorrow.

“...Altria the Calamity.”

Chapter 5: Errands

“So, what’s the first part of the exam?”

Saria, Altria, and I had left the guild and were walking down a busy street. It was every bit as lively as the guild, but it felt fresh and wholesome by comparison.

“You’ve got a few quests lined up,” she said bluntly. “The first few are errand-types.”

“Errands? Like what?”

“Well, that asshole Gustle forced three of ‘em on us, so you can take your pick.”

“Three?!”

“Yeah. Normally it’s one, but everyone hates the errand quests. He probably wanted to clear up a few at once.”

That jerk! How come this is the one time that he actually acts like a half-decent guildmaster?! Is it just a fluke or something?

Altria continued. “Basically, you gotta help out at an orphanage, demolish an old building, and walk a dog.”

“Uh... Yeah, those sure sound like odd jobs.”

Since when was the guild a dog-walking service, though? And seriously, if you don’t want to walk your dog, don’t own one. Not to mention that demolishing a building sounds a little too much for a casual errand.

“Altria-san?” I asked.

“Yeah? What?”

“About that demolishing one... Shouldn’t a professional handle it? We don’t know the first thing about taking a building down safely.”

“Nah, don’t worry. You just gotta smash it.”

“Wow. Okay.”

I guess they don’t put too much thought into that kind of thing in this world. And wait, why are we doing this quest when that guy in the guild was so determined to break stuff?

“I think I get it now,” I said. “So, which one are we headed for now?”

“The orphanage.”

I guess that comes first, then. I wonder what they want us to do?

“So, uh, one last question. Why’re you walking so far away from us?”

She didn’t reply. Since we’d left the guild, she seemed determined to give Saria and me a wide berth. Although I didn’t really mind if she wasn’t all chummy with us or anything, it kind of hurt to be avoided like that. Not only that, but none of the passersby also seemed to want to walk close to her.

Really, what’s going on here?

When we arrived at the orphanage, I still didn’t have my answer.

“Here it is,” she said bluntly.

“Really? It looks like a church.”

It was the same one we’d passed coming into town.

I guess I was wrong.

“Yeah, it’s a church,” she nodded. “They also run an orphanage.”

“Oh, okay. Mind if I ask what they worship here?”

I still didn’t have much common knowledge about this world, so I wanted to learn as much as possible.

Altria raised an eyebrow at me. “What, you don’t know? This’s a church of Belfeuille.”

“Belfeuille? So what do they believe in?”

She shook her head at me and sighed. “Man, of all the dumbass questions... Basically, they believe monsters and humans are equal and that one life’s not

better than another. They also have a slogan... ‘Love brings about miracles. It is only through love that true peace can be founded,’ or some shit like that. Basically, loving and respecting others is their whole point. Oh, and they worship a person, not some god.”

Wow... I bet that person was really amazing to get worshipped like this.

The thing about love causing miracles made some sense, too, given what happened during the fight with Zeanos. And I bet plenty of people found comfort in the whole salvation-through-love thing. Honestly, it baffled me that an actual human came up with that.

Given how many people on Earth believe in the whole love and peace thing, it's not that big a surprise. I guess this world's not too different after all.

Saria's eyes started sparkling. “Love, huh? I love you, Seiichi!”

“Huh?! I, uh... I love you, too.”

“Ehehe!”

Where'd that come from?!

Saria never seemed to be embarrassed saying stuff like that, even back when she was a gorilla. That was something a human like me could never do.

I guess that's a perk of living a monster life out in the wilderness, huh?

Altria scowled at us, but I could see her cheeks flush slightly. “C'mon, keep that sappy bullcrap to yourselves. Seriously, I think I'm gonna hurl.”

Oh. I guess we were kinda embarrassing ourselves, huh?

Fortunately, Altria was the only person around.

“Besides,” she muttered, looking away. “Love ain't got nothing to do with me.”

“Huh?”

“Forget it. C'mon, let's move.”

With that, she turned away and marched into the church.

I shot Saria a worried look. “You don't think we upset her, right?”

“Hmm... I don’t think so.” She smiled back at me.

Just seeing that smile was enough to make my heart feel warm and pleasantly full.

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“Oh, I’m sorry. We were only looking for one helper.”

After telling the elderly nun inside that we were there to give a hand, she bowed apologetically.

Wait, so does that mean we can’t finish this request?

“We normally have one of the younger sisters do this work,” the nun explained, “but she’s out today on urgent business. She’ll be back tomorrow, but we need someone to help out until then. That’s why we only need one more person. We don’t have enough money set aside for the both of you.”

That made sense. Since Saria and I weren’t even official guild members yet, I had no idea what we were supposed to do.

I turned to Altria. “So what’s the guild’s policy on stuff like this?”

She shrugged. “One of you works here; the other moves on to the other quests. This ain’t dangerous or anything, and I don’t need to sit and watch. Asking around later will be enough.”

“Oh, okay.”

She’s almost refreshingly blunt... I’m actually kind of glad she’s not mincing words with us.

“So?” Altria asked. “Who’s gonna do it?”

Saria beamed beside me. “Seiichi! Can I do it?”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

I was a little worried about leaving a monster in charge of human children.

Altria sniggered at me. “Hehe... Just look at yourself. Anyone with eyes could tell Saria’s the better choice here.”

“Yeah... You’re right.”

I doubted anyone would want a fishy guy in a baggy robe spending time around little kids. Besides, Saria not only looked better suited for it, but it was also a better fit for her personality-wise.

“Alright,” I said. “Good luck, Saria.”

She nodded. “Thanks!”

“So you’ll be working here?” the nun asked her.

“My name’s Saria! I know I’ll only be here a little while, but I’m looking forward to working with you!”

The nun chuckled. “Why, what a charming young lady you are! My name is Clare Huster, but please, call me Clare. I’m the head of the orphanage here.”

Wow, I didn’t think she was one of the top brass here. She doesn’t look the part—but in a good way, unlike Gustle. She seems so friendly and approachable.

“Glad that’s over with,” Altria said with a curt nod. “Good luck, Saria. Seiichi and I’ll be back when he’s done the other quests.”

“Okay!”

With that, Altria and I left the orphanage.

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“So, where are we headed now?” I asked.

Altria paused for a moment to think. “Hmm... Guess we should go demolish that building first. Best to get the tough stuff outta the way first.”

We can walk that person’s dog anytime, after all. I really wish they’d take care of their own pet, but I guess they probably have their reasons.

As we walked, I noticed that there was more and more construction going on, and I spotted more builders working away. Altria was still careful not to get too close to me, just like before, and we spent most of the trip in silence.

Along the way, a little boy came running towards us, maybe because he was playing tag with his friends. He wasn't watching where he was going and ended up taking a nasty spill right in front of Altria.

"O-Ow..." Tears began to well up in his eyes.

His knee was scraped pretty badly, the kind that hurt like hell. I was just about to give him a hand when Altria grabbed him and gently sat him up.

"Quit the waterworks. Are you a man, or aren't you?"

"B-But it hurts..."

"Lemme see." She leaned down to take a look. "Oof, yeah, looks rough. Hold still a moment."

With that, she pulled a small vial of green fluid out of thin air, just like I did with my Item Box.

Huh. So Item Boxes are pretty common in this world, I guess. I'm glad I won't get looked at weirdly for using mine, then.

Altria poured a bit of the liquid out onto a handkerchief and softly dabbed at the kid's knee.

"Ow!"

"Shut up. I'm trying to heal you." Sure enough, the wound faded away shortly afterwards, as if it had never been there. "See? All better."

"Wow! Thanks, lady!"

I bet that was a healing potion... I didn't know you could apply them directly to a wound, though.

I was planning on healing the kid with one of my Ultimate Healing Potions, but Altria beat me to the punch.

Altria's a lot nicer and more caring than she sounds, though. She even answered all my questions earlier, even the stupid ones.

At that moment, I heard someone cry out from above us.

"Look out!"

I whipped my head up, and a moment later, I realized that a massive piece of lumber was falling right towards Altria and the kid.

Wait, this is no time to sit around watching!

“Look out, Altria-san!”

I released my full power and stepped forward to shield them.

Altria sighed and muttered to herself. “Damn... I knew it.”

The boy was still clueless, but Altria moved quickly enough for the both of them. She reached out and caught the falling log one-handed.

“Hrm!”

Then, she carefully laid the log down on the ground to avoid damaging it. The way she’d reacted so calmly and quickly almost made it seem like she knew it would happen.

“There, all safe now,” she said to the kid. “Now scram.”

The kid finally seemed to realize what had happened. “O-Okay.” He quickly turned and ran off.

The construction worker who’d dropped the log came down to see us. “S-Sorry about that! You guys okay?”

“Yeah. Don’t sweat it.” Altria turned to me, a hint of loneliness in her eyes. “Now, c’mon, let’s go. We don’t want Saria waiting for us, right?”

“U-Uh... No!”

What was with that look in her eyes?

Nonetheless, we continued in silence, arriving at the ruined building not long after.

“This is it, right?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yep.”

The house looked like it’d been hit by the elements so hard it could collapse at any moment. It looked pretty big, so it was probably a really nice place before it was abandoned.

“Why’s it so beaten up?”

Altria shrugged. “The owner died, and the family thought it was too much of a pain in the ass to look after it.”

I can’t imagine a waste like that back in Japan... This place is big enough that the family has to be a bunch of nobles or something. They could totally just fix it up, and it’d be great.

For just being abandoned, the place was really worn down. The owner must’ve died ages ago.

“So we just need to level this house?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Just do what I say, and you won’t get—”

“Got it. I’m going to go break it. Be right back.”

“Huh?” She blinked at me in disbelief.

I ignored her and walked right up to the building.

Man, this place is big...

It looked about ready to collapse on its own, but a quick poke told me it wasn’t quite that broken down yet. I’d probably have to bust out my full strength. With that, I undid my Strength Disguise. I didn’t look any different, so Altria wouldn’t notice anything different about me unless she used Analysis on me or something.

“Hey, what’re you doing?” Altria asked from behind me.

“And-a punchy.”

I gave one of the house’s support pillars a light hit. The pillar exploded in a shower of tiny splinters, and the sheer force of my blow was enough to knock out the wall behind it as well.

Yep, I’m a monster. I wasn’t even thinking of hitting that wall, let alone completely totaling that pillar...

“What?!”

I turned around to see Altria staring at me in shock.

I'd be pretty freaked out in her shoes, too. Most people can't blow a house apart with their bare hands.

She seemed to snap to her senses a moment later and started yelling. "What're you thinking, dumbass?!"

"Huh?"

Why's she yelling at me? Didn't I complete the quest just like I was supposed to?

A moment later, it all made sense. Having lost so much of its lower support, the house began to crumble and fall apart around me. I was so shocked that I couldn't move a muscle. I watched in slow motion as the ceiling fell towards me, completely forgetting to get out of the way.

Man, I'm stupid. If it's this old, of course, I'll need to demolish it carefully.

Still helpless, the mountain of rubble fell on me like a rockslide.

Chapter 6: Fumbling With Kindness

Altria stared speechlessly as the house collapsed on top of Seiichi. Even crying out felt pointless as the rubble fell with a harrowing crash. Dust burst up like a sandstorm, making it almost impossible to see.

“Shit!” I ran over to the pile of bricks, biting my lip in frustration. “Seiichi!”

Dammit, more ‘bad luck’... I swore I’d never hurt anyone ever again!

“C’mon, please be alive!”

I’d only just met the guy, so I felt pretty sure I could get through the day without anything bad happening to him.

This ain’t fair!

With my heart filled with regret, I started rifling through the rubble. While searching, I suddenly heard a voice as casual and carefree as though nothing had even happened.

“Blech! Ugh, I got dirt in my mouth...”

“Huh?”

It was Seiichi. I thought he’d been buried alive. As I watched, the dust cloud began to clear.

“Man, I thought my heart would stop,” he said as he brushed off his robe. He looked completely unscathed. “Who would’ve thought the whole damn house would fall on me?”

I stopped rooting through the rubble. “Huh? Wait... huh?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Until now, everyone else who had gotten too close to me suffered terrible bad luck. It was honestly surprising that we made it to the orphanage without anything bad happening, so I wasn’t surprised when things started going south at the ruin. Anyone who got too close to me got hurt, period. Some people would get injured, and others would get emotionally hurt,

but there were never any exceptions. Not until now—until Seiichi. The worse that happened to him was that his robe got kinda dirty.

No... This ain't happening.

As I stared at him, I noticed that the rubble had miraculously avoided him, and the area immediately around him was totally clear. I'd seen misfortune after misfortune. I never thought I'd see such a stroke of luck.

"...Wait, the hell am I doing sitting around like this?!"

It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, no doubt. I had to keep my guard up. He wouldn't get off so lucky next time, I was sure.

"Hey, asshole!" I shouted at him. "I told you to do what I say!"

"What?"

I couldn't see his face under his hood, but he sounded confused that I was yelling at him. I wasn't surprised.

"Listen up! You'll be an adventurer soon! You'll be neck-deep in danger all the time! I don't know what you did, but you gotta be more careful!"

"I guess, but—"

"Stuff it! What if something happened to you? How am I supposed to cover your ass if you don't follow my orders?!"

"I, uh..."

"If you're seriously gonna be an adventurer, you gotta remember one thing. It doesn't matter if you're some hot-shit swordsman, or if you've got fancy-ass magic or a big-ass brain, or whatever. What you really need is a sense for danger."

"Danger?"

"No matter how strong you think you are, if you don't have that, you'll die in no time. I bet you thought you could just rip this place right down, right?"

"Yeah..."

"And look what you did! Guts will only get you killed. The best adventurers are cowards! The real pros look for the safe way out, 'cause if they die, all the

cool powers in the world mean jack shit!”

“O-Okay.”

“Guess I can’t get too rough on you, though... This one was my bad.”

“Huh? How?”

“Forget it. The point is you gotta be more careful. You’ve got Saria, and you matter to more people than you think. If you can’t cover your own ass, you can’t cover anyone else’s. Until you drill that into your head, I guess I’ll have to lend you a hand.”

“Uh, thanks.” He dipped his head. “I’m really sorry about that.”

Looks like I got through to him. I hate that my shitty condition keeps hurtin’ others, though.

I sighed and turned away from him. “That, and, uh... I’m glad you’re okay.”

I was only telling Seiichi the truth, but somehow, coming out and saying it was a lot more awkward than I expected.

Chapter 7: Conveying Kindness

After I was buried in the rubble, I made sure to commit what Altria had told me to memory. She was right. I had to be more careful—for me and for Saria.

I really should've known better. I guess this is what happens when I just rely on brute force to solve my problems and don't stop to think ahead.

After being determined to not get too full of myself and my new powers, I ended up over-relying on them anyways. It was just like with my Skills before—my Stats are using me, not the other way around. I had somehow convinced myself that the errand-type quests would be easy, and this little episode made it clear just how wrong I was. Now, I just had to be careful not to repeat that mistake again. I was glad Altria chewed me out and gave me the wake-up call I so desperately needed.

I have no idea what's got her this serious, but I'm glad she's looking out for me.

I hadn't been yelled at like that since my parents died, so it actually felt pretty good. I could tell that Altria was a good person, but I still couldn't figure out why she looked so sad or why she was so determined to keep her distance from Saria and me.

I wish I could do something to help her.

Since the house was totally destroyed now, it was about time we moved on to the last errand.

"So, uh... Does the house count as demolished now?"

She nodded. "Yeah. All you had to do was level it, so I think this counts."

"Great... But wait, who commissioned this job in the first place? And shouldn't a team handle a job like this anyways? I kind of just did it on my own, so what happens to everyone else who signed up to help?"

“It’s a request from the country itself, and the pay’s shit for the time and effort involved, so nobody else signed up.”

“Wait, you mean the government’s the client? We can just waltz in, break it, and call it done?”

“Yeah. It ain’t an urgent quest or anything, and it’s not like a request from the royals themselves or anything. ‘Sides, leaving a wreck like this standing wouldn’t hurt anybody. It sat empty for this long, after all.”

Wow, that’s pretty lax. I’m surprised we can just get away with this.

“‘Course, there is another reason,” she continued. “The country doesn’t have any say in what the guild does.”

“They don’t?”

“Nope. We take on important quests from the country in exchange for setting up here, but that’s about it. We’re not required to take on most quests and don’t swear allegiance to any flag. If you’re gonna be an adventurer, remember this: the guild is its own country.”

“A country, huh?”

“Yep. That’s why we don’t have anything to do with wars and other pains in the ass like that. If they need soldiers, they hire mercenaries.”

Mercenaries, huh... Maybe I shouldn’t be saying this, but it sounds like a pretty cool job. I bet they’re all strong.

“Oh, one more thing,” Altria added. “The orphanage will pay you guys in person, but you can accept this errand’s reward money right from the guild.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

“Alright, let’s move on to the last quest—walking the dog.”

“It sounds even more underwhelming when you put it like that.”

If I learned anything from demolishing that house, it was that there’s no telling what the task itself might involve. I couldn’t just go making assumptions.

Altria and I chatted as we headed to the location of the last quest. She was a lot more talkative now than before and pointed out a few simple landmarks as

we walked.

I'm glad Altria wound up as our supervisor.

Before long, we stopped in front of a gigantic mansion.

"This is it," Altria announced.

"Huh... Wait, seriously?!"

I couldn't keep a lid on my surprise.

Really? This is where the last quest is?!

"Yeah." She nodded. "This's the Upper Quarter, where the nobles live. The client this time is a Mrs. Adriana. She's the wife of a count, so don't be rude or anything."

"I-I-I'll try!"

Altria sniggered at how I was quivering. "Don't get yourself too worked up. She's nice enough."

"O-Okay."

With that, we started walking up the path to the front doors. An elegant brick wall with an ornate black metal gate surrounded the property. And inside, almost the entire yard was filled with flowers. I could even see things that looked like sprinklers, but they probably ran on magic. There was so much to take in that I was pretty much speechless the whole time.

We arrived at a thick wooden door at the end of the long, winding pathway. Altria pushed the little button beside the door, and I could hear a *ding-dong* come from inside.

Wait, what? Is that a doorbell? In this world? The hell?

I stared at the little device in shock.

Seriously, I thought this was supposed to be a fantasy world. Where's the worldbuilding? Is that thing supposed to run on magic or something? This isn't just handy; it's flat-out luxurious!

After a moment, the door opened, and a middle-aged woman with pretty blonde hair came out. She had a few wrinkles, but she was still beautiful and

was wearing a simple-but-elegant aqua dress.

“Who is it?” she asked in a chiming voice.

I was too nervous to say a thing.

“We’re from the guild,” Altria replied in my stead without skipping a beat.

“Oh, I’ve been waiting for you!” She beamed at us. “I hate to ask, but could you get started right away?”

“Of course.”

“How wonderful! The butler who usually walks my little angel girl got hurt, you see. I’d like to go myself, but I’m afraid I’m dreadfully busy. Honestly, you’re life-savers!”

No wonder she has a servant walk her dog if she’s this loaded.

“Where’s the dog you want us to walk?” Altria asked.

“Let me show you. Right this way, please.” With that, the lady came out of the house but paused when she noticed me. “Oh? And who’s the fellow with the cloak?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Altria replied. “He’s the dumba—er, the very capable adventurer who’ll be walking your dog.” She whipped around to face me. “C’mon, take that stupid hood off! You tryin’ to insult her or what?!”

“Wh-What?!”

I understand it’s rude to hide my face from her, but I’d rather not cause trouble here.

As I was starting to panic, Adriana smiled at us.

“Oh, I don’t mind. I’m sure he has his reasons for keeping his hood up. Don’t force the dear, now.”

Altria looked back at her. “If you say so.”

“Hehe! Come to think of it, I haven’t properly introduced myself, have I? My name is Adriana. You are?”

“I-I’m, uh, Seiichi.”

“Seiichi... That’s a fine name. You come from the Eastlands, don’t you?”

The east what?

I wasn’t about to ask her for a geography lesson, so I let it slide.

“So anyhow,” Adriana continued, “you’ll be walking my little sweetie, won’t you?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s me.”

“Wonderful! Take care of my darling Milk-chan, now.”

Milk, huh? That’s a cute name. I bet it’s a cute little white furball or something. Why doesn’t she live in the house, though? Does she have a doghouse out here or something?

Either way, I was pleasantly surprised by just how nice Adriana was and how understanding she was in letting me keep my hood on. As I thanked her mentally, we arrived in front of a giant cage.

“We’ve arrived!” she announced.

“Wait, here?”

Where’s Milk, though?

I couldn’t see anything around except for the giant cage. As I puzzled over Adriana’s words, she walked right up to the cage.

“Come here, Milk-chan! Walkies!”

“Grrrrrrr...!”

“Uh...what?”

Is it just me, or is that a very big, scary growl? Nah, I must be imagining it or something!

I broke out in a cold sweat as I watched Adriana throw open the cell door.

“Out you come, my little precious!”

“Grrrrr... GRAAAARRR!”

With a mighty roar, Milk leapt out of the cage.

“O-Oh.”

It was a gigantic wolf, no smaller than fifteen feet long.

“Uh... I’m supposed to walk that thing?” I asked.

Adriana smiled at me. “Why, yes, of course!”

“I’m supposed to... walk... that thing?”

“Of course.”

“I’m... supposed... to—”

Altria snapped and smacked me in the back of the head. “Stop playin’ around already!”

C’mon, what am I supposed to say! That thing isn’t a dog at all! It’s barely any different from the Acrowolves I fought back in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak!

Adriana chuckled. “Don’t worry, everyone says that at first. You don’t have to worry, though. She’s very tame. You have nothing to fret about!”

“Just out of curiosity, how did her old walker get injured?”

“Milk-chan bit him.”

“How am I supposed to relax, then?!”

Tame, my ass! She probably bit her old walker clean in half!

“Trust me, it’s very safe,” Adriana tried to reassure me. “We haven’t even had any trespassers in the longest time.”

“No shit!”

I mean, holy crap, what a guard dog! I bet burglars wouldn’t dare look at this place!

“Oh, don’t worry about details, now,” she continued. “Just try to enjoy your walk with her!”

“Nonononono, no way!”

I mean, c’mon, she’s glaring at me already! G-Good girl, Milk! We’re not gonna fight, right? We’re just going to walk together, right?! Sure, she probably can’t hurt me physically, but I’ll snap if I try to walk her, I swear!

As I shook my head frantically and backed away, Altria shot me a look.

“You can’t take her through town, so just walk her ‘round the garden or something.”

“Wait, where’s my say in this?!”

Yeah, right. Who in this town cares what I feel? First, I get assaulted in an alley, and now this. I’m a human; I have my rights! I... I still count as human for this kinda thing, right?

I could tell there was no backing out of this mess, though. I slumped my shoulders and let out the heaviest sigh I could manage.

“Fine. Fine, you win! I’ll walk your dog!”

Altria grinned. “That’s the spirit!”

She looked so pure and beautiful when she smiled; I could feel my cheeks blush a little. When she realized I was smitten, she cleared her throat and turned away, her cheeks reddening slightly.

“A-Anyhow, this’s part of the exam, got it? Don’t fail!”

“Okay!”

I’ll consider that smile my reward.

With that, my hErish walk with Milk began.

Chapter 8: A Walk And A Room

Back on Earth, I was hated by every living thing I'd ever met. Humans, dogs, and cats all hated my guts. Cats would always arch their backs and hiss at me, and dogs would bark at me nonstop. It was probably due to my smell, or so I wanted to believe. Of course, it still wasn't as bad as when they passed out, not to mention how that poor Clever Monkey died... Just the thought of it made me want to cry. Even though Saria seemed to love me now, everything else still seemed to hate me.

I guess Kenji and the others were my friends, though, so they probably don't hate me... I hope.

Despite all that, I loved animals and always wanted to take a dog out for a walk. This errand should've been a dream come true, then—but somehow, I wasn't enjoying this in the least.

"GAAAAH! Heel! HEEL!"

"GRARR! *Pant pant* Grrrrr, graarrrrrr!"

This wasn't what I had in mind at all. In all her fifteen-foot wolfiness, Milk was chasing me around the garden at top speed.

Aren't walks supposed to be with the dog? Like, where's her collar? The lead? Shouldn't this be relaxing? It feels like my heart's about to explode. Maybe this is how people walk their dogs in this world?

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"Screw that; this is nuts!"

"AROOOOOOOOO!!!"

No way this is how a walk should be! I mean, I'm running! And Milk's totally some kind of wolf!

“Is Milk even a dog?!” I shouted as I ran. I couldn’t stop running, though. If I did, she’d probably eat me whole.

As an aside, since we were ‘walking’ around Adriana’s garden, I was limiting my strength just enough that I didn’t tear up the ground with every step. I’d learned my lesson from my fights with the Slimes. I had one hand on my head to keep my hood on as well since it kept on slipping as I ran.

Altria watched me amusedly as I ran. “Damn, Seiichi, you’re fast.”

“Really? That’s all you have to say?!”

That’s all that comes to mind right now?!

She shrugged. “Uh... You got tons of stamina, too, I guess.”

“Fine, it’s my fault for getting my hopes up!”

Dammit! Of course, she’s not gonna help me!

Her job was technically just to watch over me, so I wasn’t that surprised.

“Grrrrr... Bark!” Milk suddenly stopped running for a moment to lower her haunches before leaping right at me.

“Crap!”

I managed to twist out of the way, letting her sail right past me.

What was that? She’s, uh... not actually trying to kill me, right?

“Grrrrr...”

“Whoa, she’s really glaring...”

That growl, those bloodshot eyes... Man, I’m spooked.

Milk backed away from me, slowly circling me as she looked for an opening.

There’s no way she’s a dog.

I decided to discreetly use Analysis on her while I had the chance.

SNOW WOLF: Level 180

“I *knew* she was a wolf!!”

Adriana, you liar! Milk's not a dog at all! And c'mon, her level's pretty damn high!

I shot a desperate look at Altria. "Milk's not a dog; she's a wolf!"

"Uh, yeah? Couldn't you tell?"

"You knew?!"

"Course I did. But what's the difference? Dogs, wolves, they're pretty much the same thing."

"They're not the same at all! She's legit trying to kill me! How am I supposed to walk her like this?!"

"Whaddya mean? You're walking her right now, aren't you?"

"I've never heard of a walk like this!"

"Great. Sounds like this's a learning experience. Keep at it."

"Dammit! I hate it when you put it like that!"

She's right, technically, but dammit! Not what I wanna hear right now!

"Oh, right," Altria added. "If it looks like you're gonna get eaten, try to protect your head."

"If it comes to that, come help me, dammit!"

She had the cutest little impish grin, and I couldn't help but stare.

Damn, she's cute.



She really didn't smile much at first, so I was genuinely happy she seemed to be opening up a little more.

Milk realized that I wasn't looking at her anymore, and she chose that moment to leap at me.

"Grarr!"

"Whoa!"

I was a little late in noticing, but I managed to duck out of the way in time all the same. I probably wouldn't have taken any real damage even if she'd hit me, but if I had let down my guard too much, I might not have been able to move my body right when I needed to.

"First tag, and now roughhousing...?"

Yeah, no way this is a walk. Seriously, where'd the relaxing part go? No walk should ever end in a fight to the death.

The worst part was I couldn't hit her back, only dodge. I didn't even want to think about what would happen if I did. In the best-case scenario, she'd suffer the same fate as that poor little Slime.

This really isn't fair.

Adriana came back out of the house, probably having finished whatever she was doing.

"Oh, my, Seiichi-san! It looks like you and Milk-chan are having so much fun together!"

"You're kidding, right?!"

What part of this looks like fun?! Go get glasses, lady! Er... they have eye doctors in this world, right? Maybe not.

Adriana turned to Altria. "By the way, Altria-chan, I made a pot of tea. Would you like some?"

Altria nodded. "Sure, I'd love some."

"Seriously?! Tea?!"

I'm fighting for my life here! Seriously, why'd you even give me this collar and lead if I don't have a goddamn chance to use it?!

"Y'know what, screw you both!" I threw the collar and lead away, spreading my hands like a pro wrestler. "You wanna play, Milk-chan?! Let's play!"

"Grrrr... Aroooooo!"

With that, Milk jumped at me, and we got right down to it.

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"Hahh... Damn, I'm beat."

"Pant, pant, pant..."

Both Milk and I were sprawled out on our backs. I'd played with Milk with everything I had, and before I realized it, the sun had already begun to set. Thinking back, if any normal person had tried 'playing' with Milk like I did, they would've gotten ripped in half. I wasn't in any real danger, though, and it might've actually been pretty fun—not in a masochistic way, of course, just in a refreshing-workout sense. Now, Milk and I were totally exhausted.

Altria shook her head at me in disbelief. "Damn, Seiichi, just how much energy do you have?"

Adriana giggled. "I know I asked you to play with Milk-chan, but I never expected you to be able to keep up with her so well!"

Wait, seriously? That's the last thing I wanna hear from her.

"Sure, I've got tons of energy," I panted.

I was actually feeling pretty okay physically, but I was mentally spent.

Her brows furrowed. "Could've sworn I saw you fending off her attacks and dodgin' without a problem, though."

"My survival instincts really kicked in."

"Damn. Sounds like you had it pretty rough."

Don't give me that! This is your fault!

I decided to keep my mouth shut. I should just be grateful they didn't start asking too many questions about my Stats. They wouldn't find anything by using Analysis on me, but it didn't hurt to be careful.

"Anyhow," Adriana said with a smile, "it looks like Milk-chan got to play to her heart's content, thanks to you."

She seemed sincere. Even Milk stood up, evidently feeling a little better, and gave me a big, sloppy lick across the face.

"Pfft! H-Hey! Cut it out!"

I wasn't expecting doggy kisses—but more than that, I didn't want her to knock my hood off by accident.

Adriana giggled. "Oh, my! I've never seen her open up to anyone except my husband and me before!"

"Wait, what about the butler who was walking Milk-chan before?"

"She never cared much for any of them. Why? We never had anyone last more than a day. I wonder if that's why they kept getting hurt."

Gee, you think?!

"But don't worry, nobody died or even got that hurt."

"That's not the problem here! How about you start thinking about your servants' well-being?!"

I feel so sorry for those poor guys having to risk their lives like that!

As bad as I felt for them, it felt good to have Milk take a special liking to me. It might not have seemed like that big a deal, but it felt like I made a real difference for once.

The more I thought about it, the less one thing about this whole situation made sense.

"By the way, how'd you and Milk-chan meet?"

Milk was probably stronger than most people around here, and it was weird to think of a regular person like Adriana keeping her as a pet.

Adriana chuckled. “Oh, it wasn’t anything big. My husband had to go to one of the snowy countries for work, you see. On the way, he came across Milk-chan as a puppy, injured and alone. There wasn’t any sign of the poor dear’s parents, so he tended to her wounds and brought her home. She warmed up to us quite readily.”

“Huh.”

I guess even monsters can be nice if they’re treated right. What Altria told me about the church of Belfeuille makes a lot more sense now. Still, I bet reality isn’t that kind most of the time.

“That’s all I wanted from you, now.” Adriana handed me a bulky-looking cloth pouch. “This is your reward.”

It was hefty enough that I couldn’t comfortably hold it in one hand, and it had a surprising amount of weight to it. I opened it up and looked inside to find it was chock-full of silver and copper coins.

“...Wait, seriously? Y-You’re joking, right?”

“Of course not. You’ve earned every copper.”

“Nonono, I can’t accept this! It’s way too much!”

I tried to hand the bag back to her, but she didn’t take it.

“Oh, come now. I saw how hard you worked to make Milk-chan happy, and it’s only right that I pay you properly for your efforts. Won’t you please accept it?”

Sure, I worked hard, but not this hard. There’s gotta be like 90 silver and 90 copper in here.

Altria seemed to notice I was still at a loss. “Just take the money. Makin’ a scene over it now would be rude. Besides, it ain’t your job to decide how much your reward is.”

“I-I mean if you both say so...”

If even Altria was going to agree with her, I decided to just accept it.

“Hehe, that’s more like it,” Adriana chuckled. “I might ask you to come again, so don’t be a stranger, now.”

“O-Okay!”

With that, Adriana smiled happily.

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After leaving Adriana’s mansion, we headed back towards the orphanage to pick up Saria.

“Good for you, Seiichi, picking up a regular already.”

“A regular?” I gave Altria a blank look.

“Yeah. Adventurers that do good work will sometimes get quests asking for them specifically. It helps build trust with your clients and gives you steady work. It means a lot, especially if you wanna be a first-class adventurer. You’re gonna want to always do good work, ‘course, but this gives you some extra incentive.”

“Okay, makes sense.”

Altria’s explanation really gave me an idea of what it meant to be an adventurer. The bit about always doing good work struck me as important for any job.

“Alright, we’re here,” Altria announced.

I looked up and saw the orphanage in front of us again. Altria marched right in, just like she had the first time. Then she called out, and in moments, Clare and Saria came out to see us, with Saria still wearing an apron.

“Seiichi!” she shouted.

Clare smiled. “Why, if it isn’t Altria-san and Seiichi-san! All done with your other tasks?”

Altria nodded. “Yeah, all done. We’re here for Saria. How’d she do?”

“Well...” Clare closed her eyes as if the answer should’ve been obvious. After a long moment, she opened them and exclaimed, “She was perfect! Brilliant!

Better than I could've possibly asked for!"

Altria and I both were startled a little at the intensity of her response.

"The sweets she made were all delicious, and she cleaned up after the children better than anyone I've ever seen! Not only that, she played with them while taking care to not let them do anything too dangerous, and she was stern with them when she needed to be! The kids simply adored her!"

As Clare explained, a mob of kids came out of the back of the church and swarmed around Saria.

"Saria-oneechan, I wanna play more!"

"No fair! It's my turn to play with her!"

"Look, look! I drew this really good, huh!"

"Saria-oneechan, I gotta potty!"

Wow... She really is popular with the kids.

Altria and I were speechless at just how well Saria went over with them.

"Hey!" Saria suddenly shouted at them scoldingly, standing akimbo. "We have guests! Now, what's the first thing we do when we have guests?"

The kids all quieted down and respectfully said hello to us, and we said hi back.

She's just like their mom.

"Sorry, everyone," Saria apologized to them, crouching down a little. "I've gotta go now."

"Awww!" the kids whined.

"Don't worry, I'll be back. Okay?"

After hearing that, the kids seemed to feel a little better, and even Clare nodded.

"Don't worry, I'll be putting out a request specifically for Saria-chan in the future! You'll be able to see her again whenever you'd like!"

Looks like Saria has a regular now, too.

With that, Clare handed Saria her reward. The pouch was small enough to fit comfortably in one hand, unlike the one Adriana gave me.

“This is your pay,” Clare said. “I’m sorry it’s so little. I wish I could afford to give you more.”

“No, I don’t mind! I’m just glad I got to meet everyone! That’s the best reward of all!”

Clare seemed deeply moved by Saria’s words.

Huh... Saria speaks kind of childishly, but she’s really got it together. Or maybe I’m just too much of a kid myself?

“Thank you for everything, Saria-chan,” Claire said again. “You don’t mind coming again, do you?”

“Of course not!”

With that, the three of us left the orphanage.

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“Alright, here’s the pay for that demolishing request.”

After returning to the now-familiar chaos of the guild, Altria passed the reward she’d gotten from Eris on to me. As I’d expected, it wasn’t as much as Adriana had given me.

“Hahahaha!” Gustle flexed as he walked up to us, Eris in tow. “It looked like your first quests went off without a hitch!”

Eris nodded. “Excellent work, both of you.”

I wonder if Gustle did any work himself?

His expression turned more serious than I’d seen him yet. “Most adventurers focus on the hunt-type quests since those pay the best. But never forget, the errand-type requests are every bit as important. I hope this stage of the exam taught you that.”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“You bet!” Saria agreed.

Sure, most of the errand quests didn’t seem very exciting. But work was work, and it wasn’t unimportant just because it wasn’t as interesting. The important thing was to bring everything you had to your job, no matter what it was.

Gustle seemed a little surprised to hear our reply, but he warmly smiled a moment later. “Good! I’m glad to hear it! Look, my muscles are jumping for joy!”

And, of course, he’s back to that nonsense!

As I sighed, Eris handed Saria and me each a little white plaque.

“These are your temporary guild cards,” she explained. “We give them to all new recruits who aren’t formally registered with us yet. Don’t lose it, now. It’s still legal ID.”

I looked at the card to find the information I’d filled out on the sign-up form written there.

Gustle nodded. “That’s the errand phase of the test done, then. Starting tomorrow, you’ll start on your gathering-type quests.”

“Right... oh, right.”

His brow furrowed. “Hm? What’s wrong?”

I can’t believe I forgot this...

“I just remembered that Saria and I don’t have any place to stay tonight.”

Altria scoffed. “What, that’s it? You can stay where I’m staying, then.”

“Huh?”

“The room price’s decent, and it’s safe enough. They even include three meals a day, and the cooking’s top-notch.”

“Sure, let’s stay there.”

I didn’t need any time to think it over, really. Hearing about the tasty food was enough. Gustle and Eris both shot Altria surprised looks.

Wait, why?

“Right, let’s get going. I’m starting to get tired.” Altria turned and walked out of the guild.

“Huh? W-Wait up!”

If we lost track of Altria now, we’d never find whatever inn she was staying at. After quickly saying goodbye to Gustle and Eris, Saria and I hurried after her.

“Eris-kun,” Gustle said to Eris just after we left. “Did Altria-kun do what I think she just did?”

Eris nodded hesitantly. “It seems so. Honestly, I didn’t think I would ever see Altria-san act so hospitably.”

He nodded. “It’s certainly a new direction for her, and a good one at that. My muscles are trembling with joy!”

“Time to get back to work, then.”

“Huh? You’re ignoring me?”

Of course, I had no idea they’d even said a thing after I left.

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“This’s the place,” Altria bluntly announced.

“Whoa...”

The inn Altria directed us to was a simple-looking building on a quiet side street. It was just the right distance from the guild. The signboard read *The Tranquil Tree*.

“Get in there already. You can’t rent a room from out here.”

“Oh, right.”

The inside was pleasantly busy. It wasn’t exactly a large place, but it wasn’t so small that it felt cramped. As I was looking around, a woman approached us.

“Oh, welcome back, Al-chan!”

Altria looked away. “Thanks.”

Al-chan? Is that her nickname or something?

As I was puzzling over it, she seemed to notice Saria and me for the first time.

“Who are these people? Your friends?”

“They’re rookie adventurers. I’m overseeing their exams. Can you get a room ready for ‘em?”

“Oh, Al-chan, you absolute dear! We just had a room for two open up. Would that do?”

It didn’t even occur to me that there might be a problem with Saria and me sharing a room. We’d fallen asleep together every night on the way to Terbelle, so neither of us felt weird about it. We didn’t waste time replying.

I nodded. “Yeah, works for me.”

Saria followed suit. “Yep! Sounds good!”

“Alright, then. How long would you both like to stay?”

I paused for a moment to think. “How about a month?”

“Sounds good, then. That’ll be fifty silver pieces if you don’t mind.”

Come to think of it, I’m glad she got what I meant by a month...

Apparently, they had a similar concept of time here in this world.

But wait, that book God gave me said ten silver pieces would be enough to live on for a year. Don’t tell me this inn’s that expensive? Or maybe there was some inflation here or something, and God just didn’t know because this world’s off-limits to them? I guess I should look into that when I have the chance.

It didn’t look like I’d have a problem on the money front either way. I pulled the coins out of my Item Box and handed them to the lady.

“Yeah, fifty’s fine with us.”

“Wonderful! Oh, my name is Fina, by the way. I run this inn with my husband and our daughter. It’s a pleasure to meet you!”

“Oh, uh... My name’s Seiichi. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Saria! Nice to meet you!”

“Seiichi-kun and Saria-chan, is it?” She smiled at us. “Let me explain how we run things here, then. We provide three meals a day but don’t have any fixed meal times. Just come to the canteen when you’re hungry, and my husband will whip something up for you. It doesn’t look like anyone’s eating at the moment, so now would be a good chance for you to meet him.” She turned around. “Dear? Can you come out for a moment?”

So the husband’s the cook? I bet he’s the stern, iron-chef type.

It wasn’t exactly a realistic stereotype, but that was the first thing that came to mind for some reason. Besides, Fina was really pretty, and I’d never heard of an inn owner not being pretty and young. That, or a nice old lady. It made sense that her husband would also be pretty standard fare.

However, as soon as he came out, all my expectations were betrayed. He was a handsome young man clad in a neat apron. He would’ve been unbelievably popular back in Japan.

“Did you call?” he asked.

“Oh, there you are! These two will be our guests for the next month or so.”

“Ah, I see!” He gave us a dazzling smile. “I’m Lyle, and I’ll be taking care of your meals. It’s a pleasure.”

“I-I’m Seiichi. Nice to meet you.”

“And I’m Saria!”

Who’d ever think Lyle was some crotchety old cook? He’s just flat-out handsome.

“Well, if either of you is ever hungry, just let me know. Just remember that only your first three meals every day are free. Any more than that, and I’ll have to charge you, okay?”

Makes sense. Honestly, I’m just glad we won’t have to worry about food.

Even the way he moved seemed so crisp and beautiful. It was like he was cheating at life.

“Oh, one more thing,” Fina added, snapping me out of my jealousy. “We don’t have a bath here, but we can get a towel and warm water ready whenever

you'd like it. I'll also handle any laundry you need done."

Wow, they really cover all the bases here. I've got my Wash spell, though, so I don't think I need to worry about laundry.

"Here you go, then," Fina said as she handed Saria and me our room keys. "Please drop them off with me whenever you go out. Oh, I'll let our daughter take you to your room."

The key she'd handed me had the number 301 engraved on it, and Altria peered over to take a look at it.

"Huh. Looks like we'll be neighbors," she mumbled. "If you get in any trouble, just let me know. Got it?"

"Thanks!"

Seriously, how is Altria this nice?

Just then, a young woman came out of the back of the inn.

"This is my daughter, Mary," Fina explained.

"Oh, are you guys new?" Mary asked. "Nice to meet you!"

"Yeah. I'm Seiichi. It's a pleasure."

"And I'm Saria!"

Mary had brown hair done up in a ponytail and bright red eyes. She was probably around my age and pretty enough that I could really tell she was Fina and Lyle's kid. She was the inn's poster girl, no doubt about it.

I guess the kid of two beautiful people is bound to be just as pretty, huh. That's probably not an ironclad rule of genetics or anything.

"Follow me!" Mary said. "I can show you around!"

We did as she said. And after a while, she stopped and pointed a room out to us.

"That's the canteen. Dad's always in there cooking, so just stop by if you're feeling hungry."

She then went on to show us the rest of the inn, giving concise explanations of every room we passed. I could tell she had it together much better than I did, which was honestly a little disappointing.

Before long, we arrived at our room.

“And here’s where you’ll be staying,” she announced.

“So this is it, huh?”

“Yep! I bet Mom told you everything already, but feel free to ask me if you need anything. I’d better get on to other work, though, so I’ll see you guys later!”

“Oh, right. Thanks.”

With that, Mary smiled and left.

Altria yawned and walked over to her own room. “Alright, you two, I’d better get some sleep. ‘Night.”

“Right. Good night.”

“Good night!”

After she disappeared into her room, I turned to Saria.

“We should probably get some sleep, too.”

“Okay!”

I unlocked the door and opened it to find a relatively spacious room. There were two beds, a table, and a handful of chairs. It was pretty well-equipped, honestly. As I checked the place out, Saria let out a cute little yawn.

“What’s up? Are you tired?”

“Yeah... A little.”

“We haven’t even had dinner, though.”

“I guess, but I’m not really hungry.”

“Okay. Wanna get right to sleep, then?”

“Yeah.”

She rubbed her eyes and plopped down onto one of the beds. A moment later, I could hear her peacefully snoozing away.

“Wow... She must’ve been beat.”

I felt pretty mentally fatigued from running around all day. But Saria probably had it worse, taking care of all those kids. I made sure to cast Wash on her clothes just in case, and then I pulled the blanket over her so she wouldn’t catch a cold.

“Ngh... Seiichi...” she muttered in her sleep.

She seemed so peaceful when she was asleep and so pretty.

“I love you... Seiichi...”

I flushed bright red.

She even thinks about me when she’s asleep, huh.

It was embarrassing, sure, but more than that, I was happy to feel so loved.

“G’night, Saria,” I whispered before crawling into my bed and falling asleep.

Chapter 9: Gathering

“Alright, show me what you got.”

The next morning, we moved right along to the gathering-type part of the exam. It was pretty straightforward since all we had to do was pick ten of the Medicinal Herbs that grew near the Royal Capital. Saria and I had split up to look for them, and we’d just returned to Altria with our findings. According to her, it was a common plant, and we wouldn’t need to go far enough afield to run into any monsters. The quest shouldn’t involve fighting anything... under normal circumstances, of course.

“First up is Saria’s haul,” Altria announced, pausing only for a moment to drop-kick another Slime into oblivion.

Didn’t she say we wouldn’t have to fight, though? She told us the spawn rate of monsters around here was really low, but I swear that’s the twentieth Slime I’ve seen her defeat.

Altria seemed to notice my confusion and grimaced. “Don’t worry, this ain’t normal. They shouldn’t attack you.”

“Uh... Okay.”

I wasn’t worried, though. I was pretty sure I wouldn’t lose to anything stupid enough to attack me.

“I’m just glad it’s only Slimes this time,” she mumbled.

“Wait, what?”

“Forget it. Anyhow, Saria, what’d you find?”

“Here it is!”

Beaming, Saria held out a big clump of grass she’d pulled up by the roots. Unlike the Special Medicinal Herbs I was used to seeing in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak, these were slightly browned and smelled like a refreshing breeze.

“Nice,” Altria nodded. “You even pulled ‘em up by the roots, like I said to.”

“Yep! I thought the quest only asked for the leaves, though?”

Saria cocked her head to the side in confusion.

“Yeah, but if you pull them up like this, the leaves will stay fresh,” Altria replied. “Not only that, but the roots can be made into medicine, too, and they’re jam-packed with nutrients. That’s why you always pick ‘em like this. Not many newbies know that these days, but it’s good to know, right?”

Whoa, it’s one of those harvesting tips that only one in ten adventurers know.

It couldn't hurt to learn more if the rest of the plant could be put to good use as well.

“By the way, the roots work best if you boil ‘em and drink the water,” Altria continued. “It’s hella bitter, though, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Is there any way to mellow out the flavor?” I asked.

“Lessee... The easiest way’s to mix in some sugar or something, but most people can’t afford to do that. Personally, I’d mix in some Sweetflower nectar. It helps sweeten it up a bit.”

Huh... If she knows all this, I bet she’s not bad at cooking. That’s just a guess, of course.

“Anyhow, make sure you always pick the roots, too. Just remember that the guild only wants the leaves, so you’ve gotta separate them before you hand them in.”

“Got it!” Saria and I replied.

“Good. Now, for Seiichi’s haul.”

“Okay! Here they are!” I held what I’d gathered out to her, smiling.

“Uh...” She stared at me in silence for a long moment. “What’s that supposed to be?”

“Mushrooms, of course.”

“Well, no shit!”

There were ten nice little mushrooms in my hands.

She let out an aggravated sigh. “You’re supposed to pick Medicinal Herbs! Why’d you come back with a buncha shrooms?!”

“Oh, but they’re not just any mushrooms! Take a good, long look. These are Mana Mushrooms!”

“Did I ask what kinda mushroom they are?!”

“Yeah, didn’t think that’d work.”

I knew it.

I didn’t bring them to her on purpose, though. I really did look, but I couldn’t find a single Medicinal Herb, no matter how hard I tried, and I ended up completely empty-handed. Instead, I found an abnormal amount of Mana Mushrooms, so I decided to take a few of those back. As an aside, Mana Mushrooms were a rare reagent needed to brew Mana Potions.

“I, uh, couldn’t find any Herbs,” I explained.

“How?! They’re Medicinal Herbs, dammit! I found like twenty while I was waitin’ for you two!”

“Huh?”

How’s that possible? After all that looking I did, too...

“Look.” She jabbed a finger down at my feet. “You’re practically standing on some now.”

“Goddamn it!”

Just as Altria said, there was not one, but five Medicinal Herbs growing right there.

Seriously, what the hell?!

“I’m surprised you found that many Mana Mushrooms,” she continued. “That’s the kinda thing people spend a whole day looking for, and maybe they’ll find one. How’d you get so many so quickly?”

“Yeah, funny, isn’t it? I don’t know if I’m super lucky or super unlucky!”

“That’s my line! Anyhow, since you didn’t find the Herbs, you fail!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?!”

Yeah, I’m not actually surprised. At all.

I didn’t want to drop out here, so I stooped down and uprooted the five Medicinal Herbs by my feet.

Now I can pass! Hehehe, all according to plan!

“See?” I held them out to her. “I *did* find some Herbs!”

“Great. Where’s the other five?”

“Uh...”

Shit! I forgot I needed ten!

“I-I’ll be right back!” I whipped around and bolted.

“H-Hey!” Altria tried to call after me, but she was too late. “Damn, how’s he that fast? Seiichi, stay the hell away from the forest, okay?! And don’t go too far! Shit, I can’t even see him now!”

I was already so far away that I couldn’t really make out what she said.

Left alone with Saria, Altria sighed. “Damn... Oh, look, five more Herbs.”

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“Seriously, how come I can’t find any?!”

No matter how much I ran around looking, I couldn’t seem to find even one more. There didn’t seem to be any shortage of Mana Mushrooms or Antidote Grass.

Where’d they all go?!

“Crap, I guess I went pretty far, huh...”

I’d run all the way to the other side of a hill, and I couldn’t even see Altria or Saria anymore.

I’m not lost, am I?

“Seriously, though, why can’t I find any Medicinal Herbs?”

Maybe it has to do with how I’m looking? I didn’t even notice those herbs by my feet, after all.

As I resolved to look even harder than before, I spotted a cluster of trees out of the corner of my eye.

“Huh? Is that a forest?”

I headed over to check it out. The vegetation seemed pretty dark and dense. It didn’t give off the same unsettling feeling as the Forest of Endless Heartbreak had, but it was definitely a proper forest.

“Huh... I bet I’ll find a ton of Herbs in there.”

With that, I walked right in. The further in I got, the clearer it became that the Forest of Endless Heartbreak was a rough place. This forest seemed almost refreshing, and it didn’t feel like the whole place was trying to kill me just because I was there.

Sure, it was dangerous, but what I found there made it all worth it.

I closed my eyes, pausing a moment to let the memories wash over me.

“Alright, back to the search!”

Just when I opened my eyes, I thought I could hear voices in the distance.

“.....!!”

“.....?!”

“.....”

“Is somebody there?”

It wasn’t any of my business either way. But since I hadn’t run into anyone at all since I started looking for Medicinal Herbs, I was curious.

Maybe they’re adventurers from the guild? Or travelers headed here from another town?

I headed toward the voices, making sure to check the underbrush as I went.

After a while, I came across the voices' owners. There were three of them, and none of them looked human. They all had distinctive blue skin—but what stuck out to me most was that one of them had big devil horns growing out of his head.

Yeah, no way they're human.

From what I could tell, they didn't seem to be in any trouble. If anything, they were in high spirits.

I wonder what they're talking about, though, way out here in the middle of nowhere?

I decided to get a little closer until, finally, I was within earshot.

One of them, a chubby little guy, sniggered. "You really did it, Bel-san! With all them traps, we're bound to catch a human or two!"

The one with horns nodded. "I did pretty good, didn't I?"

The third, a thin guy, seemed a little antsy. "B-But are you sure we should be ignoring Reiya-sama's orders like this? She told us not to go to the Human World..."

The buff one folded his arms. "I guess if she finds out, we'll all get punished."

The thin guy paled. "Oh. Y'know what, I think I left the stove on. I'd better go back."

"M-Me too," the chubby one stammered.

"Get back here!" The horned guy grabbed them both by the collar as they tried to slink away.

"Lemme go!" Chubby squirmed. "I don't want to die!"

"You think I do, genius?!" Horns barked. "Just think of it this way. If this goes off without a hitch, Reiya-sama won't punish us—in fact, I bet we'll all get cushy promotions!"

Scrawny didn't look convinced. "You sure?"

"I've got a family, y'know..." Chubby's eyes darted back and forth.

Horns rolled his eyes. “Course I know. What, you think I don’t have one? My wife’s got a bun in the oven, too.”

Chubby’s eyes bulged. “Really?”

“Why’re you doing all this, then?” Scrawny asked.

Horns chuckled. “Heh... All I’ve gotta do is see this mission through and get that promotion. My wife and kid are waiting for me.”

Chubby and Scrawny both teared up. “You’re the man, Bel-san!”

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O-Okay, what’s that about, really? Promotions, punishments... I didn’t follow half of that.

Of course, I had no idea who they were, so I wasn’t surprised their conversation didn’t make much sense.

That Bel guy totally dropped a death flag, though. I hope he’ll be okay.

I could table their conversation for now. The most important thing was asking them if they’d seen any Medicinal Herbs around or not. I wasn’t just being lazy or anything. No, of course not.

With that, I stepped out of the bushes to confront them.

“Uh, excuse me?”

All three of them whipped around to look at me in unison. “Who’s there?!”

“Whoa!”

Crap... Did they practice that response or something? I thought I’d jump right out of my skin there!

As soon as I’d calmed down a little more, I took a moment to look each of them over in turn. One was tall and lanky, and another was short and fat, just like I was before. The last one, the guy with big horns in the middle, was really buff.

Are these guys perfectly mismatched, or what?

The only trait they all shared was their blue skin; I could see now that even the tall and chubby ones had little horns.

They don't look like the beastkin I saw in town... They have horns and stuff, so maybe they're demonkin? That'd make sense.

Instead of just gawking at them, I decided to ask them what I was there for.

"So I was wondering—"

"What's a human doing here?!" Chubby barked.

"D-Don't tell me somebody saw through our plan already?!" Scrawny paled.

"Nooooo! I don't wanna get punished! Anything but that!" Horns bawled.

Well, this is a mess. I just wanted to talk to them.

I was starting to wonder just who they were, so I decided to put aside the Medicinal Herb thing for the moment.

"Uh... Who are you guys?"

The buff guy snorted. "Fine... If the cat's already outta the bag, we may as well introduce ourselves! I'm the leader of the Third Demon Regiment's General Reiya-sama's own personal squad, Victim! The name's Bel Jizel!"

The scrawny one struck a pose. "Also of Victim, I'm Bosco Dann!"

Even the chubby guy posed. "Terry Hemmut, reporting!"

"We're the Demon Army's suicide squad!" Bel shouted. "We are—"

"Victim! That's us!" they called out in perfect sync.

"Uh... Okay."

So they're just weirdos. Got it.

Nodding to myself, I turned around to leave.

"Where do you think you're going, stupid?!" Terry scowled.

Terry and Bosco circled around and cut me off.

"Oh, c'mon..."

"Did you think you could just walk away from us?!" Bosco shouted.

“I did, actually. You guys clearly have a few screws loose, so I’d rather not have anything to do with you.”

Terry gasped. “You’re awful! How can you say that?!”

Yeah, your little squad’s name is way worse.

‘Victim’ really made it sound like they’d be the first to die in any fight. They even called themselves a suicide squad. I didn’t have the words to sympathize with them. Whoever their boss was, they clearly didn’t care about these guys’ lives.

I sighed. “Look, can I just go? I’ve got Medicinal Herbs to find.”

“What’s with that attitude?!” Bosco snorted. “You’re the one who decided to talk to us!”

Oh. I guess so, yeah.

Terry sneered. “Who are you, anyway?”

“My name’s Seiichi. I’m only here looking for Medicinal Herbs, honest. I heard you guys talking, and I thought you might know where I could find some. You guys are clearly busy, and I don’t want to disturb you any more than I already have.”

“You came here for Herbs, huh?” Bosco raised an eyebrow. “Those things grow everywhere. Why'd you come out here?”

“I couldn’t find any closer to town.”

Terry snorted. “Who cares why you’re here, anyway?”

I kind of care, actually. It’s the only part of this whole mess I give a crap about.

“Seiichi, was it?” he continued. “Now that you’ve seen us, we can’t let you leave alive.”

My eyes flew open in shock. “Huh?”

Is he serious? They aren’t seriously going to try and kill me, are they?!

Terry shot Bosco and Bel a look, and understanding the signal, Bel nodded and snapped his fingers. I could hear the heavy thudding of massive footsteps

from behind him. Moments later, a ten-foot-tall green-skinned guy with an animal hide wrapped around his waist tromped into the clearing.

“This is a Troll,” Bel sneered. “You humans call it a B-Rank monster, right?”

“No clue.”

The Troll’s face looked mostly human, but it didn’t seem very intelligent from how it moved. It was totally bald, and it had big, pointy ears. It was clutching a hefty wooden club in one hand.

“Whatever,” Bel shrugged before extending his hand towards me dramatically like a nameless thug in some old anime. “Go, Troll! Finish him!”

At his words, the Troll’s eyes flew open, raising its club high above its head.

“OARRRRRGH!”

“Wait, you’re seriously gonna kill me?!”

C’mon, we only just met! What’d I do wrong?!

I didn’t know why Bel and the others were attacking me, but I had to do something either way. Fortunately, my Mind’s Eye Skill was already making it seem like the Troll’s club was moving in slow motion.

I guess I should just beat this thing up? It’d technically be self-defense.

Just as I was about to fight back, I had an idea. I hadn’t tried out the Absorption Skill I’d gotten from the Slime. I decided to give it a try as soon as the Troll’s attack was about to hit me. I stood and stared up at the club as it came down towards me in slow motion, and as soon as it touched me, I used Absorption.

Well, whaddya know?

The second I used it, the club lost all the force behind it, and I could feel indescribable energy well up inside me. It bounced around inside me for a little bit before I absorbed it completely.

“Cool, I did it.”

“.....”

Bel, Bosco, Terry, and even the Troll stared blankly at me. It took a good long moment for them to realize what had happened.

“Huh?!”

Their eyes all flew open, their lips pursed together in an indescribably perplexed look. They looked downright baffled.

“Uh... Bel-san?” Terry asked hesitantly. “The Troll hit, right?”

“Yeah...” Bel looked up at the Troll. “You hit, right?”

“Owaugh...”

Bel scratched his head. “You think he used magic or something to make it miss?”

“No, look, it’s touching his head,” Bosco pointed. “It definitely hit him.”

“.....”

They all went silent again, exchanging confused looks. Gradually, a look of terror took over Bel’s face as he started piecing the puzzle together.

“W-W-We’ll let you off easy this time, human!”

“Y-Yeah!” Terry echoed, trembling. “Just this once!”

“We didn’t lose or anything!” Bosco shook. “We’re just that nice! Got it?!”

“O-Owargh!”

Bel nodded. “B-Besides, we did what we came to do, and now we know there are stupid-strong guys like you around! We practically won!”

“Y-Yeah! We win!” Terry followed suit.

“Totally!” Bosco added.

“A-Anyhow,” Bel stammered, “now that we all agree on that...”

After hurriedly justifying themselves, all four made like the little guy on the emergency exit signs and bolted.

“Retreat!!”

“O-Orargh!”

In the blink of an eye, they were gone.

I wasn't expecting Troll to be such a fast runner, though.

.....

"Okay, but seriously, what was all that about?" I muttered.

They'd come and left like a sudden storm.

"Wait, what about the Medicinal Herbs?!"

In the end, I was never even able to ask them about the Herbs.

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"Oh, there you are!" Saria shouted and waved.

"Took you long enough," Altria scowled. "Where'd you even go?"

In the end, I couldn't find a single Medicinal Herb, and I dragged my feet back to where I'd left Saria and Altria.

"So? How many more did you find?"

I know she doesn't mean anything bad by it, but man, that hurts!

"Uh... About that," I mumbled.

Her eyes widened in disbelief. "You're kidding me. For real?"

Can I just cry now?

"I really did look! All I could find was a few dozen Antidote Grasses and Mana Mushrooms..."

"The hell?! How'd you find so many of those things when Medicinal Herbs are a million times more common?!"

"Trust me, I wish I knew."

I could feel tears well up in my eyes; I just wanted to cry.

Altria took one look at me and let out an irritated sigh. She then snatched a small bundle off her belt and roughly thrust it out at me.

"Here, take it. Happy now?"

“Huh?”

It was a bundle of Medicinal Herbs—the five that I was missing.

“I was pretty much standing on ‘em when you left.”

“Wait, how?”

And after how hard I looked, too! This is just messed up!

“I ain’t supposed to do stuff like this, of course,” she continued, “but it’ll hurt you more than it hurts me anyways. Just take it already.”

“A-Are you sure?”

“C’mon, take it already. Just don’t expect me to wipe your ass like this again.”

“Altria-san...!”

That’s it. You’re officially my sister! My buff, rough big sister!

She seemed a little confused by my idolizing look, so she pointedly turned away.

“A-Anyhow, that’s that! Let’s get back to town already!”

She stalked off toward the town gates. Saria and I exchanged smiles before following her.



Chapter 10: Teleportation Magic

“**W**hoops, guess you caught us! We feel really bad about going to the human world behind your back, but we finished our mission with no problem! Shouldn’t you be praising us for that? Sure, it wasn’t a real mission. We just went off on our own, but still! We came back with all kinds of useful info, so you’re not going to chew us out or anything, right? Uh... right? Okay, I’m sorry! We’re so, so sorry! I was just kidding! We feel really bad about what we did, so please, don’t be too hard on us!”

I—Bel Jizel, leader of the Third Demon Regiment’s special squad Victim—was down on my hands and knees.

Above me stood a woman with a cold and disapproving look. She had flowing purple hair that seemed to radiate an otherworldly beauty. Her eyes were like amethysts, and her skin was so pale blue I was surprised I couldn’t see right through it. Not only that, she had a figure that could drive any man mad and make most women die of jealousy. Her dress was revealing enough on its own, but how she crossed one leg over the other was almost maddening. Despite how downright sexy she looked, she was our boss, General Reiya Farzer of the Third Demon Regiment.

But we of Victim happened to know one of her secrets.

“You’ve still got quite the tongue on you, I see,” she mused. “Shut up awhile, won’t you?”

“Hahaha, what do you mean by—blepth!”

Reiya created a whip out of air using her unique Vapor Magic and suddenly struck me across the face.

“Bel-san!” Terry and Bosco cried out in horror.

I was sent flying, and those two chased after me. Sure, they were my subordinates, but we cared about each other like family.

“This’s really bad, Bel-san!” Terry sweated.

Bosco nodded frantically. “Reiya-sama’s really mad!”

“Yeah...” I finally put two and two together. “Damn. She did it again?”

I shook my head and sighed as Terry and Bosco helped me to my feet.

“How many does that make?” I whispered.

Terry thought a moment. “I think she’s at 666 now.”

“Well, shit. Talk about having no luck with men...”

Bosco shook his head. “That’s a lot of guys.”

“Almost makes her sound like some hero, going through that many demonkin, huh?” Terry smirked a little. “Even though we’re the Demon Army.”

“That’s, uh...”

“That’s not funny,” we all sighed in unison.

Across the room, I could see Reiya muttering irritably to herself.

“Honestly, what was his problem?! What’s not to like about me?! I was so sure that he was my destiny!”

Reiya’s secret was that she was a total virgin, despite how hard she tried to resist it. She’d had plenty of boyfriends—666 of them, apparently, all of the most handsome demonkin in the land. She was well known for being beautiful, so that wasn’t a surprise. No, there was a reason she felt she had to keep it a secret.

“So she took him to her room?” I whispered.

Terry nodded. “Sounds like it.”

I sighed. “Seriously, why’s she gotta keep doing that? Every time she brings them there, they run away. You’d think she’d figure that out already.”

The reason she’d broken up with each and every one of them was the same—her room. She kept nothing in there but torture devices, after all. She had all the classics like ridged wooden benches but some more creative ones and even some weird bloodstained metal rods just lying around.

The hell does she think any guy wouldn't run away?

The worst part was that she was a total airhead regarding stuff like that, and she couldn't stop dreaming about romance. I bet she kept bringing men in there so she could live out all her fantasies.

I dunno what kind of 'romance' she's got planned in a room full of torture gear, though.

"Oh, drat, this is bad!" Reiya cursed to herself. "I'm not going to be an old maid at this rate, am I?!"

"Don't worry, Reiya-sama!" I called out. "With looks like yours, you can get any man you want!"

"Then why do they keep dumping me?!"

"S-Sorry, I was only trying to cheer you up!"

If any of us explained how downright horrifying she could be, we'd all be good as dead.

Man, this job's a pain.

"It seems I got a little carried away." Reiya sighed, composing herself before fixing us with an icy look. "So? What was so important that you had to go to the human world?"

Alright, if we can make a good case for ourselves here, then maybe she won't punish us so hard!

"Well, you see, we were planting Teleportation Magic traps around."

She raised an eyebrow. "Teleportation Magic?"

It was just like it sounded—it could move someone or something from one place to another in an instant. The longer the distance travelled, the more mana it cost. However, what we did was plant Teleportation Magic in the ground, giving it a destination and pouring all the necessary mana into it for later. They could last just like that until somebody activated one by stepping on it.

"So what, exactly, were you trying to achieve?"

“It was all so that we could whittle away those humans’ strength as much as possible!”

She nodded. “I see. So where is it set to send them to?”

Reiya seemed to get our plan right away. She really was amazing, even if she didn’t have a guy.

Anyhow, if everything went according to plan, any adventurer or merchant who stepped on one of our little traps, even by accident, would get teleported away. Once that happened, they’d be good as dead. We could kill as many humans as we wanted without raising a finger. We’d chosen the perfect place for their grave, after all.

I puffed out my chest. “We set the destination as the lap of the strongest guy in the Demon Army, the nest of one of the two Dragon Gods—Black Dragon God-sama’s Labyrinth!”

Her eyes grew wide. “Oh, my!”

Aside from the Demon King himself, who wasn’t even fully revived yet, the Black Dragon God was the strongest guy in the whole Demon Army. The other Dragon God, White, was just as strong but not quite as good in a straight-up fight, so we went with the Black Dragon God’s dungeon.

“The Black Dragon God-sama can’t leave his Labyrinth, right?” I continued. “That means until His Majesty revives and breaks the seal, he can’t go to the human world and wreak havoc. So we thought, why not send the humans to him?”

“Your conclusion is a little weak, but alright.”

But c’mon, I’m a friggin’ genius for thinking this up, right?!

Reiya nodded. “I think I understand now. Don’t forget, though—worthless troublemakers or not, you’re still one of the few combat forces of the Demon Army.”

“Wait, does that mean you need us?”

“.....”

“Why aren’t you saying anything?!”

Isn't 'worthless troublemakers' a little harsh as-is? The least she could do is take back the 'worthless' bit!

Reiya sighed. "Honestly, I'm tired of all three of your stupid antics already."

"Terry and I aren't stupid, Reiya-sama!" Bosco cut in.

"Yeah," Terry echoed. "Bel-san's the stupid one!"

"Whose side are you two on?!"

I never expected them to betray me! I'll chew them out later.

"At any rate," Reiya continued, "I understand what you were doing in the human world now. How many of those traps did you set?"

I puffed out my chest. "A hundred!"

She wrinkled her nose. "Ugh, that few?"

"What?!"

"I-It's not just a few!" Terry protested emptily.

"And here, we worked so hard to pour in all that mana!" Bosco said, half-crying.

Terry, Bosco, and I all collapsed to our knees in despair.

"Where did you put these traps, exactly?" she asked.

"Uh... Just outside the capital of the Kingdom of Winburg, Terbelle."

"Oh. If it's that close, I could easily make over a thousand."

"H-Holy crap," the three of us baulked in unison.

Is this what it means to live on the bottom rungs of society?!

"That's horrible... You're horrible, Reiya-sama! What's your beef with us?!"

"You're pathetically weak."

"Dammit! This sucks!"

The worst part was that we knew just how much stronger she was than us.

"B-But at least you get what our plan was now, right?" I stammered.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

We all let out sighs of relief.

Good... Maybe she won't punish us now.

A bewitching smile spread across her lips. “You still went against my direct orders, though, so it's punishment time!”

“NOOOOOOOOOO!” we all screamed.

Dammit! And here I thought we were gonna make it out alive... She was just toying with us, wasn't she?!

“Why don't we start light with 500 lashings, hmm?”

“That's not light!” I protested.

“Shut up.”

“This is so unfa—Gack!”

“Bel-san!” Terry and Bosco ran over to me, but they both got whipped before reaching me. “Gweh?!”

After that, all three of us got a hellish five-course punishment meal and were forced to savor every morsel. I more-or-less survived, which was honestly more than most sissy so-called heroes could've claimed.

As my punishment ended, I realized I had forgotten something important.

I didn't tell her about that Seiichi guy, did I?

Chapter 11: The Teleporting

“Alright, today’s the day of the final stage of the exam—the hunting quest.”

I, Seiichi, was listening to Altria explain what the plan was while we walked through town. Since we already did errands and gathering-type quests, this would make the last step Saria and I needed to become officially licensed adventurers.

“So what do we need to beat?” Saria asked innocently.

“Just Slimes,” Altria replied. “Normally, you don’t find any too close to town, but since I’ll be with you two, we won’t have to go far.”

Didn’t Altria say something similar during the gathering test? I wonder what she means by that?

“It doesn’t matter what kind of Slimes you beat, either,” she continued. “Regular ones, special ones, whatever. Beat ten of them, and you’ll pass the test.”

“Okay,” Saria and I replied.

We walked in silence for a moment or before Altria turned to Saria with a curious look.

“By the way, Saria, how’re you gonna fight? You don’t look armed, and you don’t even have a staff or anything.”

“Huh?” Saria blinked at her in surprise.

Right, I guess Altria doesn’t know she’s a Kaiser Kong. I bet she doesn’t even know Saria’s weapons are officially her ‘smokin’ hot fists.’

Saria beamed and punched the air in front of her. “Just like this! Bang, bang!”

“.....”

After a long moment of staring at Saria’s slender arms, Altria turned to me.

“Hey, Seiichi? I don’t see any ‘guns.’ She got special equip or something?”

I shook my head. “No, she just punches stuff.”

“Bullshit. Seriously?”

“Seriously! Really, trust us!”

To be fair, though, I’d be just as confused if a cutie like Saria suddenly told me she would fight monsters with her bare hands. Deep down, she’s a gorilla, and I mean that in a good way!

“So she’s got special training or something?” Altria continued.

“Nope.”

“...You wanna get smacked or somethin’?”

“Why?!”

“Don’t gimme that! How’m I supposed to believe some total newbie can fend for herself with only her bare hands?!”

“You’ve just gotta believe.”

“Like fucking hell I’ll believe you!”

Yeah, that’s about how I’d reply.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “If push comes to shove, I’ll be able to bail her out.”

I was confident that it wouldn’t ever come to that, though. At nearly level 800, I doubted anything around here could touch her.

“Sure, but talk’s cheap.” Altria let out a heavy sigh and rolled her eyes. “Y’know what, fine. Not everyone’s cut out for fighting, anyway. You’ll be fine this time, especially since I’ll be with you, but buy a dagger for next time, just in case.”

Altria seemed to have come to the wrong conclusion about Saria, but that was fine for now. Besides, even a kid could beat a Slime to death with their bare hands if it was a low enough level.

As we talked, we arrived at the gate. We filled out all the paperwork, just like we had when we went out on that gathering quest, and then moved to leave

town. Right before we stepped outside, though, I spotted a familiar face.

“Hey, if it isn’t Seiichi!”

“Oh, Claude!”

Saria beamed at him. “It’s nice to see you again!”

We hadn’t seen him since we’d first come to town.

“How’ve you two been?” he asked with a smile.

“Fine, thanks,” I replied. “You know we haven’t been here long, though.”

We’d only been in Terbelle for three days so far.

“Yeah, guess so. What brings you out here, then?”

“We’ve on the last step of the guild entrance exam,” I replied. “We just finished filling out the forms for our hunt quest.”

“You guys, uh... You haven’t caught the perv bug, have you?”

“Course not! Don’t go lumping us in with those sadomasochists, muscle maniacs, lolicons, and flashers!”

He scratched his head. “Yeah, that place’s a real mess, huh?”

Wait, he’s right. Not one of them’s even close to normal.

“I knew that much already, though,” he continued. “You kinda get used to dealing with them.”

I get the feeling the guild needs a good PR guy or three to fix their image...

“So, who’s your proctor?”

“It’s Altria-san!” Saria beamed. “Look, right over there! See that super pretty lady filling out those forms?”

Claude did a double-take. “Damn, you’re right. It is Altria! How’d that happen?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Huh? What do you mean?”

He stopped to think for a moment before smiling at me. “She’s got a bit of, uh... baggage, I guess. She’s nice deep down, though, so promise you’ll keep

treating her well after you become full-fledged adventurers. Alright?”

I didn't really get what Claude was talking about, but that didn't really matter.

“I don't know what you mean, but I've seen just how nice she is. It didn't take long for us to figure that out.”

Saria nodded. “Yep! She means a whole lot to both of us!”

“Alright,” he nodded curtly. “Good.”

Just then, Altria walked over to us, evidently having finished with the forms.

“Alright, that's done... Hey, if it ain't Claude!”

He nodded. “I was just chatting with these two.”

Altria raised an eyebrow at him. “You know them?”

“More or less,” he replied, a slight smile on his lips. “Looks like you found yourself some good friends.”

“Huh?” She blinked at him in confusion.

“Forget I said anything.” He turned back to Saria and me. “This is your final test, right? I want to see you both back here without a scratch, got it?”

“You got it.”

“Yep!”

He nodded approvingly. “That's what I wanna hear.”

With that, he turned around and got back to work.

“The hell was that about?” Altria muttered after him.

There wasn't any point in just standing around, though, so with that, we left town.

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“Alright, let's get right to hunting,” Altria announced. “Look, there's the first Slime already.”

After leaving the gates, we walked a fair distance from the walls. Just as Altria said, we spotted our first mark a couple yards away. Analysis told me it was level 3, a mob for the most basic of beginners.

“Let’s get this over with. Just to be clear, now, you’ve each gotta kill ten. Who wants the first one?”

“I’ll take it,” I said.

I stepped forward, facing the Slime head-on. Using one of my weapons on it struck me as a little too overkill.

Maybe I should take it out bare-handed? No, wait, it says I use magic on my guild card. I should probably kill it with a spell.

As I was mulling over my options, the Slime leapt right at me.

“Snap outta it, Seiichi! It’s comin’ right at you!”

“Whoa!” I took a half step back. “W-Wait! I’m not ready!”

“What kinda idiot would tell a Slime to wait?!”

“Me! I would!”

The Slime didn’t stop, of course.

Alright, I’ll use magic! I won’t blow it away with one of my stronger spells, though... I’ll use the weakest, lowest-mana-cost one I have.

Mind’s Eye was already slowing the Slime’s movements for me. But just as I was about to attack, something unimaginable happened.

“Huh?”

I was still seeing things in slow motion, so I could see exactly what had happened. The ground beneath the Slime suddenly started glowing, and it vanished before I could do anything.

“...Huh?” Saria blinked.

“The hell?” Altria muttered.

I cocked my head to the side. “The Slime vanished?”

What's going on? I'm positive it was right there, heading straight toward me. Where'd it go?

Saria and Altria seemed just as baffled. Altria was the first one to compose herself.

"I guess if it's gone, you can't kill it," she shrugged. "Let's find the next one."

There didn't seem to be any point in looking for it if it was gone, after all. Saria and I obediently started looking for the next one. However, it vanished just like the first one, the next, and the next. After the ninety-ninth Slime mysteriously vanished, Altria stopped and furrowed her brow in irritation.

"Damn... What the hell's goin' on here?"

I bet that weird glow has something to do with it, after all. Maybe Altria knows something about that?

"Hey, Altria-san?"

"Yeah? What?"

"Well, I happened to notice that every time a Slime disappears, the ground kind of glows for a second."

"Glow? Huh." She put a hand to her chin to think. "The ground glows... A Slime disappears..." After a long moment, her eyes grew wide. "Oh, shit." She quickly locked eyes with Saria and me. "The exam's cancelled. We're going back *right now*."

"Huh?"

"Why?"

"I dunno who did it, but it looks like some dumbass set Teleportation Magic traps around."

I furrowed my brow. "Teleportation what?"

I get what those words mean, but not together.

"Basically, with Teleportation Magic, you can move someone or something wherever you like. From what you've said, it sounds like it's one of the fixed-location types."

“I think I get it... But who’d put those things all over the place?”

“How the hell should I know?! Anyhow, we’ve gotta get back to the guild now. There’s no telling where those Slimes went, and somebody’s gotta look into it. I just hope it doesn’t lead somewhere dangerous.”

Altria turned to lead the way back to town. As soon as she took her first step, the ground under her lit up, just like it had with the Slimes.

“What the—?!” She froze.

“Altria-san!!”

Before I could fully process what was happening, I had already reached out towards her, and Saria was right there with me. At the same time, we touched Altria’s back.

With a blinding flash, all three of us were spirited away.

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“Huh...?”

After the light had faded, I opened my eyes and found myself in a room I’d never seen before. It was dark and gloomy like a cave might be, but the walls were all made of interlocking brick. It looked almost like an old maze.

“Where am I?”

“The hell should I know?”

“Huh?!” I whipped around to face the familiar voice.

“Seiichi!” Saria cried out.

Not only Saria but Altria were standing there.

“Oh, good. You’re both okay!”

“I guess,” Altria replied as she scanned the room. “Seriously, though, what is this place?”

“You don’t know?” I asked.

“Not a clue.”

I took a moment to root through my memories, but no monster I'd ever killed knew of a place like this.

Okay, seriously, what's going on here?!

As I was thinking, Altria shot me an irritated look.

"Hey, Seiichi. The hell'd you follow me?"

"Huh?"

"You too, Saria. What, you see some bad shit, and you both decide you want a piece of it? If you hadn't butted in, you might be all cozy back in town right about now!"

She seemed genuinely angry. Saria and I exchanged looks.

"What'd I tell you?" she continued. "The one thing you really need as an adventurer is a sense of danger. Seriously, what the hell? You better think long and hard before you answer."

I'd honestly never seen her like this. I decided to just reply as honestly as I could.

"Well, uh... Before I knew it, I was already reaching out to help you."

"Huh?" She blinked in surprise.

"Me, too!" Saria chimed in. "My first thought was that I had to save you, and just like that, I was reaching out for you!"

Same.

I knew it wasn't good to just move on impulse all the time, but I was so determined to save her that I just couldn't stop myself.

"Maybe it sounds careless to you," I said, "but all we wanted was to help you. Honest."

She looked down and was quiet for a long moment before replying in a mumble. "...I've never met anyone like you guys."

"Huh?"

She looked up, and suddenly, she was back to normal.

“I guess there’s no point crying over spilt milk, huh. Since nobody knows where the hell we are, I’ve got something for you two.”

“You do?”

Altria tossed us each a silver-colored pebble. “That’s a Compass Stone. If we’re gonna be an adventuring party, we’ll all need one in case we get separated.”

“Separated?”

“Yep. Those pebbles you’ve got have traces of my mana in ‘em. Use it, and it’ll guide you towards me. ‘Course, it only points you in my direction, but it’s better than nothing.”

Makes sense. Now we’ll be okay, even if, by some freak odds, we get split up.

“Anyhow, don’t lose those,” she continued. “And stick right with me, so we don’t get separated at all. Got it?”

“Okay!” Saria and I replied cheerily.

She furrowed her brow in worry. “Just... take this seriously, okay?”

With that, she turned around and pointed at one of the room’s doorways.

“Let’s head down that corridor first.”

“Alright.”

“Okay!”

Altria took her first step forwards towards the doorway.

CLICK!

Everyone froze, then turned slowly to face the source of the sound—the ground at Altria’s feet.

“Sh-Shit.” She broke out in a sweat. “I think I just tripped a trap something.”

“No! Altria-saaaaaaan!” Saria and I cried out, but it was too late.

A thick brick wall rose out of the ground at a frightening speed, cutting her off from us entirely.

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“Seriously?! We got split up before we even left the first damn room!”

Are you kidding me?! And after all we just said about sticking together, too!

“Oh, right! That’s why Altria-san gave us those Stones!”

“Yeah! Let’s use them!”

I quickly pulled out my Compass Stone. I watched as it softly floated out of my hand, then drifted forward. A moment later, it bumped into the wall.

.....

“Well, no shit!”

Of course, she’s on the other side of the wall! We knew that already! Tell us how to get to the other side already!

“Dammit... I got my hopes up and everything, but if this place really is a maze, then these dumb rocks are totally pointless!”

Knowing where she is doesn’t help us at all now! I know Altria-san warned us about that, but still!

As I was cursing, Saria tugged on my sleeve.

“We can’t just stay here forever, Seiichi. Why don’t we try that passageway? Maybe we’ll find a way to meet up with Altria-san if we just keep walking in her general direction?”

Saria was right, of course. Sitting around and whining wasn’t going to help us at all.

“Alright, then, let’s do this! It’ll be our first real dungeon since beating Zeanos, but we’ve got this! Altria-san’s waiting!”

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

Since Altria wasn’t here, I didn’t have to hold back, either, and I was going to use every bit of strength I had to see her again. With that, Saria and I hurried down the passage and into the labyrinth.

Chapter 12: Lost In Labyrinth

“K_h!”

I, Altria Grem, was locked in combat with a monster wrapped head to toe in bandages. I was so used to fighting monsters by now, but this thing was literally on a whole different level.

>MUMMY MAN: Level 233

That was all my Analysis Skill would tell me about this thing. I’d never even seen a monster this strong before, let alone fought one. My level was only 100, after all. S-Rank adventurers were probably fighting monsters like this all the time, but I was totally new to it. I made it a point to never get out of my depth—until now.

“I’ve gotta get back to those two...!”

“Oooooohh...!”

The Mummy Man didn’t back down, unleashing vicious swing after swing with its lanky arms. The walls around it creaked and whined with the sheer power of its movements.

“Hngh!”

“Oooohh... OOOOOHHH!!”

Its eerie cry echoed all around me as I dodged its attacks by a hair. In one unexpectedly swift motion, it landed a heavy blow square on my gut, sending me flying backwards.

“Guh?!”

The pain was almost enough to make me pass out, but I barely managed to hold onto my consciousness. I ended up slamming right into the wall, sending a web of cracks all up the wall behind me. I dazedly looked at the bricks behind me.

Damn, this is one strong wall...

Everything was starting to look cloudy, and I felt like just collapsing then and there.

No... I can't give up now!

Until now, everyone who got close to me wound up suffering from horrible luck. I was pretty much Death in human form, and nobody in their right mind wanted to get anywhere near me. I thought it would always be like that—until I met those two, at least. They were different. They went out of their way to save me, of all people.

I'll make it back to them if it kills me!

That had never happened to me before. Maybe it was just because they hadn't put together how much trouble I was in yet, but either way, they tried to save me. That made me so happy.

I spurred my aching body into action, pulling a healing potion out of my Item Box and swallowing it down in one swig. It wasn't anything fancy, though—just the kind of potion you could buy anywhere. It healed me enough to get up again, but that was it.

No way I'm gonna collapse before I see them again. No way I'm dying here. I'm gonna get them home safe, dammit!

I had only one option.

"Get the hell outta my way, creep! I SAID MOVE!"

"Ohh?!"

I shouldered my Legend-tier weapon, the Land Axe, and swung at him full-force with a Skill.

"Power Slash!"

The battleaxe scored a clean hit on the Mummy Man, biting deep into its shoulder.

"Now DIIIIIIIEEE!!"

"OOOOOOOOOHHH!!"

Putting in another surge of strength, I ripped the monster clean in half.

“Hahh... Hahh...”

I stood there panting for a minute as I watched it turn to motes of light and fade away.

I was a little worried if I could finish it in one hit since its level was so much higher than my own. Fortunately, between the Land Axe doubling my physical stats during combat and Power Slash doubling my Attack for one hit, it was enough.

I turned around to look at the wall behind me, noticing that it had already completely repaired itself.

This is one weird dungeon... What's this place even made of?

Puzzling over it wouldn't help me now, though. I quickly stuffed the Mummy Man's drops into my Item Box before running off. I met a few other monsters as I went, but I could brute-force my way through them. Before I realized it, I'd hit level 113 and strengthened a few combat Skills along the way. In exchange, however, I was pretty beaten up and totally out of potions.

After a while, I arrived at a section of the labyrinth that looked different from anywhere else I'd seen so far.

“The hell is this?”

There was a massive door in front of me. It was made of a strange metal that seemed to shift between pitch-black, ash-grey, and snow-white. All kinds of red and blue gemstones were embedded in it, along with countless intricately wrought dragon motifs. It was beautiful, but it also had a sense of horrible presence that sent a frigid chill down my spine.

“Isn't there some other path around here?”

I took some time to look around, but it seemed like every path led me towards this one door. I even checked all the walls for secret doors.

“Damn... Nothing here.”

I couldn't find a single switch or gimmick.

“Guess that means I have only one option,” I said, turning back to the massive door.

I’d checked every passageway on the way here as best as I could, and I wasn’t confident I could find anything new even if I doubled back. Maybe there was a side path or secret door that I’d missed, but I wasn’t that great with that kind of thing, to begin with. Even if I did find a hidden room or something, the chances Seiichi and Saria would be inside it were close to zero.

“Guess I’ve got only one option, huh.”

I went back to the intimidating metal door. Normally, there’s no way I’d go poking my head into such an obviously dangerous place like that. This time, though, I was fighting for something bigger than myself. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Alright... I got this.”

I reached out to push the door open, but as soon as I touched it, all the gems started glowing, and it swung open on its own.

“Uh... Okay.”

I swallowed hard but pressed on anyways.

“Hm...”

The room inside was too dark to make anything out. I could feel my whole body tense up as I went on high alert.

Just then, the door slammed shut behind me.

“What?!”

I ran back to push it open, but no matter what I tried, the door wouldn’t budge.

The hell’s going on here?!

I broke out in a cold sweat. Then, suddenly, the lights turned on.

“Huh?!”

I clamped my eyes shut at the sudden light. When my eyes finally got more used to the brightness, I opened them and looked around.

“Oh, shit...”

The first thing I saw was worse than I could’ve ever imagined.

“And here I thought I might have worthwhile company... Are you prepared to become my snack, girl?”

It was an impossibly huge, pitch-black dragon.

Chapter 13: Mysterious Monsters

“Huh...?”

“Do you think that’s a human over there, Seiichi?”

“Nah, no way. There’s no way, right?”

Saria and I had been wandering aimlessly throughout the labyrinth, looking for Altria. We had to stop when we saw a lone monster blocking the corridor.

<SANDMAN> Level: 350

Wow, I haven’t seen a level so high since the Forest of Endless Heartbreak. Isn’t that a little too high, actually?

The Sandman was shaped like a human but made out of sand. It didn’t seem to have ears, a nose, or even eyes, but it looked like any human might from its outline alone. If it really was a monster, it’d just be a matter of beating it up and moving on, but it was standing perfectly still for some reason.

“You think it’s alive?” I wondered aloud.

“.....”

It didn’t budge.

Man, this is kinda weird...

Saria tugged on my sleeve. “Hey, Seiichi?”

“What?”

“We’re never going to find Altria-san if we just stand here. Let’s ask it to let us through!”

“Wait, you’re gonna talk to it?!”

I tried to imagine myself talking to a pile of sand.

.....

Nope, no way! I don't wanna turn into some weirdo! Though I guess I've done my share of weird things in my time... oh, damn. Hahaha, why can't I stop crying?!

Saria had a point, though—if we didn't get past that thing somehow, we might never find Altria. I decided to follow her suggestion and try talking to the thing. It crossed my mind that we could try just walking past it, but I didn't want it backstabbing us or anything.

“Uh... Hola, amigo?”

“Fwoooooooooorh!!”

“Whoa! Okay, *that* got it moving!”

I must've offended it somehow.

Maybe I shouldn't have used Spanish? And here I thought that was one of the biggest languages on Earth after English! Er, wait. On Earth. Right.

Isn't it a little too energetic now, though? I've only seen running form and speed like that on Olympic sprinters! And how is it screaming like that without a mouth?!

At any rate, it was now headed right towards us. It looks like we were right to not try walking right past it.

“C'mon, this isn't fair! We only wanted to get through!”

“Look, Seiichi! He's just fine after all!”

“Yeah, fine enough to try and kill us! And stop talking about it like it's human or something!”

“So what're we going to do, Seiichi?”

“Well, uh... Good question.”

If we ran away, we'd have to go back down the hallway we came down, and I didn't want to waste time like that. Since we had to meet up with Altria as soon as possible, we only had one option.

“Okay, fine! Looks like we'll have to fight it!”

According to all the games and manga I read back on Earth, things made of sand were weak to water. That meant my Water Magic would be my best bet.

I stuck my right hand out towards it. “Water Laser!”

Glad I have this stuff. Otherwise, sand monsters tend to be a real pain.

A high-pressure stream of water burst out of my hand.



A high-pressure stream of water burst out of my hand. At that moment, however, I realized I'd made a critical mistake with my Water Laser. I only had the names and Mana costs of the different spells in my head, so I assumed it was a little jet of water or something. When I cast it, though...

Pew... BOOOOOM!!

A brilliant flash of light shot out of my palm, sweeping from low to high and cutting the Sandman vertically in half. A split second later, the monster fell to the ground in two sloppy halves with a thunderous booming sound.

.....

"Oh..."

It's a real freaking laser?! And c'mon, it didn't even take that much Mana! How does it have that much firepower? How does water go BOOOOOM like that under any circumstances?!

Still trying to process everything, I looked down at the Sandman.

"Fwo... orgh..."

With a low moan, it dissipated into motes of light.

"Seiichi?"

"....."

"I think it's dead."

"...Yeah."

Saria only said it very matter-of-factly, but somehow, I felt like crying again. I didn't feel any more human than that Sandman had been.

We didn't have time to wait around moping, so I decided to grab its drops and move on. Just like with the Slimes, its little Stat spheres turned into light and got sucked into me before I could look at them. There were also a few Skill Cards in the mix, but I'd have plenty of time to check them later when we were back with Altria. I didn't level up, though this time, it only made me feel more like a monster.

Inside the little book labelled *A Sandman's Life*, however, I came across a startling truth—its favorite food was well-fertilized dirt. I was so irritated at how useless that was I ripped the book in half and just threw it away.

Its drop item, however, was even worse. There was only one little pouch of sand left.

<ANTIMAGIC SAND> Has the potential to disrupt mana or magical effects. However, it has no uses in its current form and must be forged into glass to have effect. It cannot disrupt offensive magic in any form.

What the hell?! How am I supposed to use this stuff, then?! I guess I'll find some use for it later... I'd sure as hell better!

Between its high level and my high Luck, I was really disappointed in its drops.

"Guess there's not much I can do about it, though... At least the path's clear now, so let's get going."

"Okay!"

With that, we got right back to exploring the labyrinth. We didn't run into any more monsters, and we came across a large room before long. There weren't any corridors leading out of it, so it seemed like a dead end. It was completely empty except for a jet-black treasure chest in the middle of the room, which gave off an unsettling aura. Even the carvings covering it were so creepy; the last thing I wanted to do was open it.

Whaddya know, first impressions really are important.

Saria pointed at it. "Seiichi, look at that!"

"Yeah, I see it. Don't get any closer."

"We're not going to open it?!"

Hell, no. That creepy paint job, that weird black mist creeping out of the lid... no way I'm getting anywhere near that thing. It's downright terrifying.

I was just about to turn around and leave when it happened.

Click... clickclackclickclackclickclack!

"What the...?!"

The chest started moving.

Holy shit, that's creepy!

"It's moving," Saria pointed.

"Y-Y-Yeah, I can see that!"

How is Saria not freaking out? I'm totally freaking out!

I was bad with anything and everything horror-related, though. If the chest started saying anything now, I didn't know what to do.

"OooooooooOOOOooooohh...!"

"D-Dammit, it's talking!"

That's terrifying! First the Slimes, then the Sandman... how are all these monsters talking without mouths?!

"With a lot of effort," a voice moaned.

"Oh, okay, so that's how... Wait, who said that?"

I had no idea where the voice came from. It clearly wasn't Saria's, and it couldn't be Altria's.

Wh-Who am I talking to, then?

I broke out in a cold sweat as I slowly turned back to face the chest.

"O-Oh."

Saria beamed at me. "That's amazing, Seiichi! You're really talking to a treasure chest!"

I fucking knew it! How is that possible?! It doesn't even feel as weird as it should be! Maybe because I talked to Saria all the time when she was a full gorilla? Maybe not.

Either way, we were talking.

Did I get so strong I can talk to monsters now? Please tell me that's not it! Maybe there's something inside the chest that I'm talking to?

At that moment, though, the chest started shuddering again.

Clackclackclackclackclackclack!

I hope whatever's in there is okay 'cause that chest is shaking like crazy now!

It didn't feel so scary anymore—actually, I was just feeling sorry for whatever was inside it.

After a moment of violent shaking, the chest suddenly froze still.

“H-Huh?”

“I wonder what's going on?”

Saria and I could do nothing but wonder at this point. A moment later—*Popopopopopopopopopop!*

A bunch of human-like arms and legs sprouted out of the chest right before our eyes.

.....

“...Huh?”

I couldn't follow.

.....

That's just too weird! Like, what the hell?! That's so gross!

The sides of it were now covered in disturbingly humanoid arms, and countless legs were coming out of the bottom. As I gawked, it stood up and started walking right towards us.

“Oh, look! It's so cute!”

“Cute? How?!”

Nothing with that many limbs could be cute! I can't even tell if it's failing to be scary or failing to be funny! Sure, it's creepy, but more than that, it's just plain weird! Aren't there any normal monsters in this dungeon?!

“Hehe.” Its cheeks flushed.

“C'mon, don't gimme that!”

Is that thing alive? How?!

I decided to use Greater Analysis on it to check.

<TREASURE CHEST> Level: 900

“Shit, that thing’s strong!”

I mean, 900?! I haven’t been this shocked since Zeanos! And that thing’s just a box!

As I was gawking at its weird appearance and crazy level, it let out another low moan.

“Die...”

“Why?!”

Isn’t that a little mean?! We only just met! I didn’t even lay a hand on it, so what’s the big deal?!

“I’m... a treasure chest...” it groaned. “Why didn’t you open me...?”

“Well, sorry!”

I guess it would be rough to just get ignored like that, huh.

“I’ll... kill you...” it creaked.

“That’s kind of harsh, don’t you think?!”

“.....”

“Dammit! Even the treasure chests are ignoring me!”

The Chest charged right at me without another word, with a sprint as elegant as the Sandman’s was.

Maybe there’s a good track coach monster around here?

“Alright, I’m sorry I ignored you! Honest! C’mon, can’t we just talk this out?”

“No... talking...”

“Dammit, you won’t even lend me an ear?!”

“I don’t... have ears...”

“How are you talking without a mouth, though? And you can hear every word I’m saying!”

“.....”

“Stop ignoring me whenever you don’t want to answer!”

“...Die.”

“How about we have an *actual* conversation here?!”

Man, what a self-centered prick. I officially hate treasure chests.

It kept running right at me.

“Y’know what, I’m not giving up! I’m gonna calm you down, and then we’ll talk!”

The Sandman was pretty much a lost cause, but this thing was smart enough to talk. If there was any way to work through this peacefully, I was determined to do it. I decided to use the lowest Mana cost spell I had to stop it in its tracks.

“Stop right there! Aqua Bullet!”

I extended my hand towards it, and just like with Water Laser, a high-pressure pellet of water shot out.

Pew!

The Aqua Bullet punched right through the center of the Treasure Chest.

.....

The chest collapsed, rapidly fading away into motes of light. “No... regrets...”

There was a long moment of silence. Finally, Saria broke it.

“Seiichi?”

“.....”

“I think it’s dead.”

“DAMMIT!” I shouted.

Just when I thought it couldn’t get worse, I heard an all-too-familiar voice inside my head.

>You have levelled up.

Not for the first time, I wished that stupid voice could read the mood.

Chapter 14: The Calamity Resists

“Guh...!”

Altria was sent flying, crashing violently into the wall behind her. The black dragon looked at her disapprovingly. “Hmph. I suppose I should praise your determination if nothing else, human.”

“Hahh... hahh... dammit!”

I didn’t even have the energy to reply to it. As I tried to stand up, my body screamed out in protest, and I could feel my legs were ready to give out altogether.

No... I ain’t dying here!

Still dripping blood, I stood to face the dragon again. It opened its eyes in surprise.

“You’re more durable than I thought,” he mused. “Very well. I won’t simply kill you—I will make your strength my own.”

“Huh?”

Make my what his own?

I struggled to piece his words together through my pain.

“Without further ado, then,” he growled as he opened its fanged mouth and leaned in towards me.

Oh, I get it. It’s gonna eat me. Like hell, I’ll let it!

I cleared my mind through sheer force of will.

“Hm?!” Noticing the determination in my eyes, the dragon stopped.

“Damn, I hate doing this...”

Clutching my Land Axe tightly in both hands, I pulled out my trump card.

“Graaaaaaaaaah!!”

“What?!”

My body was suddenly overcome with the irrepressible desire to kill. At the same time, I could feel my mind grow numb to reason.

One of the main reasons they called me the Calamity was how I made everyone around me unlucky. This technique, though, was where the name really came from. When real bad news was about to hit, I could shut off my brain to wreak havoc on everyone and everything around me. Basically, I became a Calamity greater than whatever bad shit was about to happen to me. It wasn't a pretty solution, sure, but it worked. Thanks to it, I could overcome any disaster that came my way. Not only that, there was nobody around now who could get hurt. I could lay into the dragon without worrying about collateral damage.

I grit my teeth. “Calamity Berserk!”

I could feel my last shreds of reason slip away as the raw desire to kill gripped me.

The dragon backed away a little, confused. “What?”

I couldn't see a thing. I couldn't hear a thing. I couldn't even think.

“GRAAAAAAAAH!!”

“Hm?!”

I let loose and destroyed. That was all.

Chapter 15: Heavy Impact

After accidentally killing the Treasure Chest with a single spell, Seiichi was in the process of going through its drops.

“Hm... Looks like the spheres with its Stats and its Skill Cards are sticking around this time.”

Unlike with the Sandman, they weren’t just sucked into me automatically.

I wonder what the difference between this time and the last is.

Thinking about it wasn’t going to get me anywhere now, so I got back to the drops.

“Alright, let’s start with the Skill Cards.”

SKILL CARD
UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION: Use to acquire the Skill Universal Language Comprehension.

MAGIC CARD
DIMENSIONAL MAGIC(ULTIMATE): Use to gain proficiency in Dimensional Magic.

“Wow, uh... That’s something.”

Hahaha, I got more cheats! More... more cheats. Why does this hurt so much?

I could check the details later. For now, I just used them both and moved on.

Honestly, though, I was expecting a little more in the Skill department...

Thinking of that, I moved on to the Stat spheres.

STATS			
MANA: 50,000	ATTACK: 0	DEFENSE: 0	AGILITY: 50,000
M-ATTACK: 50,000	M-DEFENSE: 0	LUCK: 0	APPEARANCE: 50,000

“Wait, I’m uglier than a *chest*?!”

That Appearance... Damn, that Appearance! How does a glorified box have looks like that?! That’s too high! And man, is that one min-maxed caster build!

Seeing that Agility, it made sense that it could sprint like that. I absorbed all the spheres and moved on.

“Alright, I guess next would be *A Treasure Chest’s Life*.”

I picked up the hardcover book lying on the ground and looked at the cover. It read *The Tale of the Treasure Chest*.

“You, too?!”

Just like Zeanos! Wait, I guess that means... yep, it says right here. ‘This is a work of nonfiction.’

“It’s not a tale, then!”

Does the guy publishing these things even know the difference between fiction and nonfiction?! I mean, I guess everyone messes them up, though.

As I was obsessing over the title, Saria walked over to me and peered over my shoulder at the book.

“Oh, we read one of those in the forest! Is that the same one?”

“Huh? No, it’s probably different.”

“Really? Can you read it?! I want to hear!”

With that, I started reading *The Tale of the Treasure Chest* aloud.

The Treasure Chest is a Unique Monster with a storied past.

I stopped.

Unique Monster? I guess that would mean there's only one of it, huh.

I kept reading.

Originally, it was nothing more than an ordinary chest used by an adventuring party to carry their things. It had no self-awareness back then, and it was nothing more than a tool. However, when a certain famous adventurer salvaged the first Item Box from a high-level dungeon, the Chest's role in the world began to change.

Item Boxes used to be physical things, back then.

I can't imagine what it looks like, though. I guess that also explains why Altria had one.

I continued.

The Item Box made it possible to carry any number of things without having to worry about weight or bulk. Chests, on the other hand, were heavy and had a limit to what they could hold. Even so, that party continued to use the Treasure Chest. Item Boxes could only be salvaged from the depths of perilous dungeons, after all.

A certain mage solved that issue, however, devising a means of mass-producing Item Boxes. In the blink of an eye, they became household items, and the Treasure Chest lost its purpose.

That made sense.

So Item Boxes are that commonplace here, huh? I should probably buy one for Saria when I get the chance, then. No wonder chests went out of fashion.

"Poor Treasure Chest..." Saria muttered sadly.

That's so sweet of her. I guess she's more in tune with her emotions since she never had to worry about all of society's mess. I wish I could be that honest with myself.

I continued reading.

Eventually, even the Treasure Chest's party started using Item Boxes. The Treasure Chest was thrown out. It wanted to continue being useful, however. It wanted to be put to work. In that moment, the Treasure Chest became aware.

By that time, though, it was too late, and the party was already gone. It wanted someone to notice it, so it practiced speaking and eventually gained the ability to speak. Nobody heard it, however, and it spent night after night alone. With every sunrise, it dreamed of the day a human might use it again.

You poor Treasure Chest! That's so touching! I'm so sorry for ignoring you after you went through all that!

I went on.

Many years passed, but still, no humans came to use it. The Treasure Chest grew depressed. Years turned to decades, and the Chest grew jaded in its despair. Then, it made a realization. If nobody wanted to use it, all it had to do was make itself seem more usable.

That... didn't seem like the kind of thing a chest could think up.

The Treasure Chest thought of all the things the Item Box had that it didn't. The Item Box could carry anything, and it was essentially weightless. And so, the Treasure Chest mastered Dimension Magic. With that, it could store anything and everything it wanted without growing heavier. It had no limits.

Holy crap! That's way more than any chest I've ever seen!

I kept reading aloud.

Lastly, it considered how it was still so hard to carry. However, it couldn't think of any way to beat the Item Box in that respect. Instead, it decided to grow arms and legs.

I had to reread the last line a few times.

Why? What made it decide to do that? How can you even 'decide' to grow limbs?!

I continued.

Now that it had legs, it could move on its own and even cast magic. Truly, it was the Treasure Chest of the future.

Now it made sense.

That's amazing... but is it just me, or is that a pretty weird thing to focus on?

I was nearing the end of the book, so I decided to push on.

Now that it could move and talk on its own, it struck out into the world to find a human to use it. For some reason, however, every human it met treated it like a monster and attacked on sight. Instead of being welcomed with open arms, it was shunned as a horrifying beast.

The worst part was that it was pretty much all the Chest's fault.

Even after losing all hope, however, the chest never gave up on its dream of being used by a human. It began to wander endlessly, dreaming of the adventuring party it had once lost and the warmth and laughter they had shared with it.

That was the last page of *The Tale of the Treasure Chest*.

.....

"Wow. That was pretty heavy," I muttered as I looked off into the distance.

I'd been through my fair share of bullying back in Japan and had some hard times in this world, but I didn't have it anywhere near that rough.

"The Treasure Chest really went through a lot, huh?" Saria mumbled sadly.

I never really stopped thinking about all the stuff people threw away, but after reading that, I couldn't help but feel that some of it might still be useful. Even if it looked like trash, it might just need a little work.

As I thought about it, I turned to face the little chest the Treasure Chest had dropped.

It's like stacking dolls, huh.

I opened it, and inside there was a pouch full of coins and a ring.

"The coins can just go right in my Item Box. What's this ring, though?"

I picked it up to get a better look and saw a pretty little purple gem embedded in it. I decided to use Analysis on it.

<RING OF MISFORTUNE> Legend-tier equipment. A ring brimming with the Treasure Chest's regrets. Gives the wearer a -2x multiplier to Luck.

“How is this thing Legend-tier?!”

This thing’s effect just sucks! I mean, a negative multiplier?! If I put this thing on, I’d be the unluckiest guy in the world! How come it’s a Legend with such shitty stats?

After learning the Treasure Chest’s past, I couldn’t bring myself to just throw it away.

I guess I’ll be fine as long as I never put it on.

I chucked it into my Item Box and let out a sigh.

“Well, that’s all the drops,” I said as I scanned the ground again. “Wait, the hell are we doing taking a break here?! We’ve gotta meet up with Altria-san!”

“But Seiichi, this room’s a dead end,” Saria said. “We’ll have to go back.”

Looking around, I realized she was right. The only way out of the room was the doorway we took in.

“I guess we might as well check and see which direction Altria-san’s in, though.”

It’d help us figure out where to go if we hit a fork in the path, after all. I pulled the Compass Stone out of my Item Box but froze as soon as I saw it.

“Hm? Hey, Saria, was my Compass Stone always red?”

“No, I thought it was silver.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Looking at it now, though, it was glowing red and slowly pulsing. After seeing mine, Saria pulled out her own Compass Stone.

“Oh, mine’s red now, too.”

Her Stone was acting up just like mine.

“What’s this supposed to mean?”

The way it’d changed colors and was giving off light now seemed almost like a warning. Saria seemed every bit as confused as I was, and just then, it hit me.

“Wait, why don’t I just use Analysis on it? Maybe that’ll tell us what’s going on.”

Altria had only given us the gist when she handed them to us, after all. It might have a function or two that I didn’t know about. With that, I used Analysis.

<COMPASS STONE> By channeling the user’s mana into it, the Compass Stone will always point to them. If the user is in trouble, it glows red to inform others of the danger.

“Altria-san?!” Saria and I both cried out.

This is bad! Altria’s in trouble! We’ve gotta move!

“Where is she?!” I panicked. “Which way do we go?!”

“I don’t know!”

After a moment of chaos, I finally remembered.

“Oh, duh! I’ll just use the Compass Stone!”

I used it and watched as it floated into the air. It drifted a few paces forward and bumped into a wall.

.....

“Dammit! Why didn’t I remember that?!”

Why can’t this useless thing tell us how to get to her instead of just her general direction?!

I couldn’t believe I made the same mistake twice in a row, but that probably just went to show my desperation.

“Screw this stupid wall! Screw all these stupid walls!!”

I slugged the wall at full strength.

DOOOOOOOM!!

“.....”

Saria and I both froze in shock. After all, I’d hit the wall so hard it disappeared.

“...How?”

Just one punch was enough to break it. No, I didn't just break it. I practically vaporized it.

"Sheesh... Just how much of a monster am I?"

I was just plain stunned by my own power. Looking through the hole, it looked like the sheer force of the punch was enough to blow away the wall behind it, too.

Why didn't I just punch that first wall that split us up, then? Although I guess if I did that, I could've seriously hurt Altria-san, too.

Just as I started despairing over my horrific strength again, Saria gave me an energetic slap on the back.

"Look, Seiichi, you did it! Now we can head straight to Altria-san!"

"We what? Oh!"

That's right! This isn't the time to mope. If I just keep on breaking through walls, we can just follow the Compass Stone to Altria-san! Yay, cheat powers!

"I'm gonna make a run for it, Saria, so I'm gonna pick you up. Alright?"

"Okay!"

Between the two of us, my Agility was way higher. The fastest way forward would be to carry Saria and use Flash nonstop all the way there. Of all the ways to carry Saria, a princess carry would probably be the quickest and easiest.

And here I thought I'd never do a real princess carry... I guess you never know what life has in store. Of course, I'd probably be right if I still lived back on Earth.

"Alright, hold on tight," I said as I scooped Saria up. "I've never run at full speed before, so I've got no idea how fast this will be."

"Okay!" She nodded.

With that, I used Flash and zipped forwards.

Chapter 16: The Prince Comes Bearing A Princess

“K_{gh}...”

All I wanted was to make sure Seiichi and Saria made it out okay...

I was covered head to toe in blood and didn't even have the strength to stand anymore.

The dragon shook his head as he looked down at me. “What a terrifying girl.”

Dammit... This is it...

Even at full strength, I couldn't do a thing. Not one of my attacks was enough to break through his scales.

“Never did I imagine any human could surprise me so,” the dragon mused.

I was too exhausted to even hear the dragon's words clearly. Just staying conscious was about all I could do. I'd broken a bunch of bones, and from how I was hacking up blood, my internal organs were probably a total mess.

“Hahh... hahh... kuh!”

I couldn't even see clearly, and my ears were filled with my own ragged breathing. It took me a moment to realize I was crying. I'd lived an unfortunate life and worked hard to make sure nobody else got hurt because of me. I fought tooth and nail to get strong enough to resist this stupid Calamity, but in the end, it was nowhere near enough.

Thinking back, the short time I'd spent with Seiichi and Saria was the happiest of my life. I couldn't count how many times I'd smiled. After all the lives I'd ruined, I was almost afraid I'd forgotten how to. They helped me get in touch with emotions I didn't know I still had, and I didn't regret overseeing their exam for a heartbeat. That's why failing them here hurt so much. Even though this was all my fault, to begin with, I wasn't even strong enough to help them out of this mess.

I really am 'Calamity' Altria.

“At least you’ve calmed down somewhat,” the dragon said in a low growl. “Now I can finally devour you.”

He opened his massive jaws and slowly, slowly leaned down towards me. I couldn’t move a muscle, let alone get out of the way.

I’m sorry, you two... All I wanted was to get you guys home safe.

“In the end, you still got wrapped up in my mess... I’m so sorry.”

With that, I closed my eyes and waited for the end as tears continued pouring down my face. At that moment, I heard something.

.....BANG...

.....BANG...

...BANG...

...BANG!

The dragon stopped and looked around in confusion. “What?”

The thunderous banging sound slowly grew louder and louder. Soon, I could feel the ground tremble beneath me, and pebbles started shaking loose from the ceiling.

“What is this? What is the meaning of this?!” The dragon seemed genuinely shaken.

I was looking at the doors I’d come in when it happened.

...BANG!

BANG!

Right before my eyes—

KABANG!!

The heavy metal door was blown clean off its hinges.

The dragon’s eyes grew wide with shock. “My door! What in the world is— Bwagh!”

Whatever had broken down the door didn't stop, slamming right into the dragon. The force was enough to send his massive black body sailing across the room and into the far wall. That wasn't half as surprising as who the newcomer was, though.

"Dammit, I guess I was going too fast to stop," the young man said with a sigh. "Well, whatever we just hit was enough to stop us!"

"Hey, Seiichi? I think that thing you hit was alive. I think I heard it talk."

"Wait, seriously?! Uh, whoever you are, I'm sorry! There, all done. That should smooth things over perfectly."

Standing there was Seiichi, cradling Saria in a princess carry.

Chapter 17: Reunion

I was low-key freaking out. I set Saria back down on her feet.

Wow... Who knew I was that fast? I blink, and boom, I've already run so far I don't know where I am. What a mystery!

In all seriousness, I was shaken, though I did want to know what my top speed was at some point. More importantly, I was pretty sure I ran smack into something alive, just like Saria said.

I hit it hard, but it's alive, right? Maybe not.

Just as I was worrying, I heard Saria shout. "Oh, look!"

"What's up?"

"Over there, on the ground! It's Altria-san!"

"What?!" I followed where Saria was pointing to see Altria lying in a pool of blood. "Oh, shit! Altria-san!"

We ran over to her, but she didn't even move.

"Haha," she chuckled feebly. "Sorry, you two... I wanted to be the one to get you outta this mess..."

I was speechless. Even though it looked like she was dying, she was still putting our safety first.

"Don't just stand there, Seiichi!" Saria chided me. "You've got to heal her!"

"R-Right."

I propped her up and pulled an Ultimate Healing Potion out of my Item Box. I was just about to give it to her when Saria suddenly shouted, "Seiichi! Behind you!"

"Huh?"

I whipped around to find a massive gout of flame rushing towards me. Even with Mind's Eye slowing things down for me, it was so sudden that it didn't even occur to me to dodge. Saria was already well out of the way, no doubt she was expecting that I'd be able to dodge it with no problem. I turned my back to the flames and hugged Altria tight to my chest so she wouldn't get burned. Saria cried out in horror from where she was watching.

The scorching inferno hit my back like a wave, and it felt like we were sitting in a furnace. I focused on giving Altria the healing potion, desperate to lessen her pain even a little bit.

"Dumbass," she muttered weakly. "The hell didn't you dodge...?"

It's not that I didn't dodge; I couldn't.

My mind totally went blank as soon as I saw all the fire. The biggest reason for that, of course, was that I wasn't used to getting attacked out of the blue like that. I didn't have enough experience for that. I wasn't going to just sit and get attacked, though—even if I couldn't react in time, I had plenty of options now. It wasn't over.

The flames flickered and died out, and although Altria's wounds were healed now, she still looked exhausted. I scooped her up and headed to where Saria was a short distance away.

"Seiichi!" Saria cried out as she ran towards us.

I handed Altria off to her, and she carefully put Altria down a safe distance away.

"Are you okay, Seiichi?! You're on fire!"

"Yeah, I was pretty hot, wasn't I?"

"No, you're really on fire!"

"Oh."

Yep, no surprise there.

If anything, I was surprised that the flames hadn't burned more than just my robe—I was perfectly fine. Sheep-san must've put some kind of enchantment on it that I didn't know about.

That woolly little bastard... He told me it was just a regular robe now! I bet he enjoyed watching me freak out just now.

It didn't look like the robe would be taking any more hits for me, though. The fire quickly ate at the fabric, reducing it to ash. I tried to use Absorption to put out the flames, but it didn't work for some reason. I could try to put it out with Water Magic, but since I still couldn't control the output, I didn't want to risk it. It'd suck if I accidentally ripped myself in half in the process. Fortunately, the fire wasn't spreading beyond the robe itself, so I just took it off and let it burn.

"Seiichi...?" Altria muttered from behind me. She was probably surprised to see my black hair.

I turned around to face her, but she had already fainted.

"Saria, keep an eye on her."

"Okay! I'll be rooting for you!"

"Thanks."

With that, I turned back to face the monster that had attacked us—a massive dragon covered in pitch-black scales. He was narrowing his blood-red eyes at me, and flames were twisting out of his colossal jaws.

"Foolish human... Your kind has quite the nerve to stand against me again!"

Looks like someone's pissed. What'd I ever do to him? And what does he mean, again? How about you go cool your head, buddy? You were the one who hurt Altria-san.

Somehow, I got the feeling he wouldn't listen to reason.

"Unacceptable... I'll never forgive you foul creatures! You shan't leave my Labyrinth alive, human!"

Yeah, I thought as much.

I pulled out my rapiers, Black and White.

"Is that so? I guess I'll have to beat the crap out of you first, then!"

With that, I dashed forward towards him. Altria risked her life fighting for us, so it was my turn.

I swear, we're all going to make it out okay!

Chapter 18: A Great Battle (And a Great Step Forward?)

“Take this!”

“Grrrarr!”

I swung Black and White at it with everything I had. The dragon easily deflected my attack with his massive claws.

Damn, those things are hard!

“Foul human!” he spat. “You and your kind are a blight on this world!”

He swung his tail in a wide arc at me.

Whoa... This guy's really strong. I hate to admit it, but my Attack was over a million, and he blocked it like it was nothing.

I ducked out of the way of his tail, then used Greater Analysis on him.

<BLACK DRAGON GOD> Level: 5,000

“Level *what?!?*”

That's more than twice Zeanos' level! Seriously, what's the level cap in this world anyways?! Bigger isn't always better! And wait... Black Dragon God? I'm fighting a god right now?!

As I was gawking at him, he took a vicious swipe at me with his claws.

“Die, human!”

“Whoa!” I dodged it by a hair. “Damn, that was close!”

“Fool! Stop dodging!”

“Why?!”

“I can't hit you if you dodge!”

“That's why I'm dodging, dumbass!”

C'mon, nobody would let their opponent hit on purpose.

I kept evading attack after attack. The sheer force of the Black Dragon God's attacks left massive scars on the floor and walls.

"Hmph! Fine, take this!"

He narrowed his eyes and glared at me. It took me a moment to realize what had happened.

"Wh-What the heck? Why can't I move?!"

I could feel an incredible pressure envelop my body, to the point where I couldn't move a muscle.

How?! I have Bind Immunity and everything!

As I tried to puzzle out what was happening to me, the Black Dragon God attacked.

"Perish!"

His tail whistled through the air towards me, but I still wasn't too worried. My Stats were higher than any normal human's could be, so even if I got hit, it shouldn't be that bad. Besides, I could probably use Absorption to suck up any damage he could deal me.

The next instant, however, I realized how wrong I was.

"Gah?!"

I could hear my ribs crack as the tail smacked into my side, and I was sent flying straight into the wall.

"Gack!" I hacked up an unhealthy amount of blood. "Wh-What the hell?!"

What was that?!

I wasn't proud of it, but my Defense was also over a million. Even if the Black Dragon God's level was a few times Zeanos', I couldn't believe it had an Attack that high—not to mention that I even activated Absorption when he hit me. Despite all that, though, the tail hit like a truck. That probably meant I couldn't use Absorption against any of its attacks.

Man, I haven't been sent flying like that since my fight with Saria way back in the forest...

"Seiichi?!" Saria cried out.

"Hahh... Hahh..." Panting heavily, I wiped the blood off my mouth. I'd used my last Ultimate Healing Potion on Altria, so I ate a Special Medicinal Herb instead. It helped, but it wasn't enough to heal my injuries completely.

"Hmph." The dragon scoffed. "Judging from the look on your face, you weren't expecting to be blown away so easily."

"....."

Bulls-eye.

"It seems you indeed possess the raw strength to challenge me," he continued. "But you're nothing more than a whelp. You trust your power far too much."

"....."

Again, he was right. I couldn't say a thing. Deep down inside, I was perfectly confident in my Stats. My monstrous strength somehow comforted me, even though I complained about it. I never imagined I could lose to anything or anyone. But now, the Black Dragon God hit me hard for whatever reason. How he pulled it off aside, the message was clear—even against truly horrifying strength, there were still ways to deal damage. I had no idea how, but I had to fight either way. If I didn't, none of us would ever escape this place. No more holding back—if I was in danger, I'd have to dodge every attack.

The dragon seemed to notice my expression changed, and he narrowed his eyes in turn. "So you've abandoned your hubris," he muttered, and the flames lapping at his jaws grew more intense. "Fine! I shall obliterate you with the strongest magic I possess, then!"

With that, he opened his mouth wide and faced the ceiling. Then, the flames began to compress within his mouth, and his gaze dropped back to me.

"Behold, my strongest magic, Hell Inferno! Even the strongest of antimagic effects shall be swallowed whole by its flames! Now, return to the ash from

whence you came, human!”

“Uh-oh!”

If he finishes casting that, I’m dead!

Judging from how I couldn’t use Absorption on the flames on my robe, I couldn’t count on using Absorption on this spell. On top of that, it sounded like my magic-cancelling Magic Hole spell couldn’t cancel it out, either.

What the hell am I supposed to do, then?!

As I watched, the flames grew more and more concentrated. There was still too much fire in the air to be able to get in close enough to attack, and with that much fire, I wasn’t confident my Water Magic could douse it. After all, I didn’t even know what most of my magic did. I fired off a Cutter Kick just to see, but it was totally lost in the flames.

Oh, this is bad.

Just as I was about to fire off the highest-cost Water Magic I had in one last desperate gamble, Saria cried out, “Seiichi!”

“Huh?”

I turned around to where she was tending to Altria.

“Use the magic you tried to use against me before!” she shouted.

Wait, what was that again?

I thought back to when we first met and the fight we had then.

.....

“Oh!”

I never wanted to remember that part of the fight, but it all came back to me now. It was the first magic I ever used and a spectacular failure. I shuddered.

I won’t make the same mistake this time, though. I’m not who I was back then!

“Hm?” The dragon raised a bemused eyebrow at me.

I shut my eyes and took a deep breath, raising my hand to the sky.

“Okay... I got this.”

Given how it went last time, I was pretty nervous.

“Resign to your fate, human,” the Black Dragon God sneered. “You cannot stop me now!”

The mass of compressed flames in his jaw was already as big as he was. It didn’t matter, though—I was determined to see it through.

My eyes flew open, and I shouted the incantation. “Waterfall Disaster!”

It was the same magic I failed to use against Saria and the one I nearly ended up drowning myself with. It was my only chance now—and I wasn’t going to mess it up again. I knew how to aim it this time.

“Hehehe... HAHAAHAHA!” the dragon guffawed. “And here I thought you were going to try something! Nothing’s happening, foolish human! Now, perish —”

Just then, there was the rumbling of water from above him, rapidly growing louder and louder— the sound of a disaster.

“Wh-What?!” He frantically looked up, and his eyes widened. “Water?! How is there so much of it?!” It only took a moment for him to process it. “Why is it headed right for me?! Stop! S-Stop! You’ll hit my spell!”

The deluge didn’t stop, though, mercilessly crashing into him at full force.

“Gaaahh! No... No, not my magic! Not my blublublublublublub!!”

“.....”

Huh... So that’s what happened to me, too.

As I reminisced, the water put out the Black Dragon God’s flames, and there was enough of it that great waves were even starting to pummel me from where I stood.

Oops, we’ll drown, too, at this rate.

I cast a Magic Hole by the Black Dragon God’s feet, absorbing the excess water from my spell. Now we wouldn’t have to worry about the room flooding.

Is it just me, or does it seem even stronger than when I used it in the fight with Saria? I guess all those Magic increases and level-ups paid off.

“I-I can’t breathe!” the Black Dragon God sputtered.
“Blublublublublublublublub!!”

“.....”

I know how you feel, man.

I shot him a sympathetic look. He had it even worse than I did back then.

“T-Turn it off! Stop it! Stooooooooop! Glublublublub!”

“.....”

The more he shouted, the more water he swallowed.

Sorry, that’s a no-can-do. I mean, I literally don’t know how.

Instead, I just gave him a warm smile.

“Wh-What’s that smile for?!” he sputtered. “Please! Stop! I’ll do anythiiiiiiing!”

However, his cries fell on deaf ears, and it was a full five minutes before the water finally ran out.

※ ※ ※

“Hahh... Hahh...” the Black Dragon God panted, finally free from the water.

“Whoa...”

That was way more water than I was expecting. Man, that spell’s scary... not that it matters right now.

“You insolent human! I’ll grind you into dust, even if you plead for mercy!”

I could tell it was really ticked off, and I honestly wasn’t surprised.

“Now, die!” With that, he swung his arm in a vicious swipe, and three glowing energy slashes flew out from his claws. “Tear in twain! Tyrant’s Claw!”

Huh, just like my Mighty Claw.

With Mind's Eye slowing them down, it was easy enough to step out of the way. Instead of flying past me, the energy slashes changed direction and started following me.

"My Tyrant's Claw Skill will follow you to the ends of this miserable world if they have to!" the Black Dragon God boasted.

"Dammit!"

Scratch that; this is way stronger than Mighty Claw. It looks like it'd hurt a lot more, too.

I kept dodging, trying to lose the attack somehow, but they were too persistent.

This is annoying!

There wasn't any point in running, so instead, I decided to try out one of the Zeford Dueling Style's techniques that Zeanos left me.

"Skill Break!"

Just as it sounded, it could pierce through and stop any Skill in its tracks. That was the only effect it had—it only worked against Skills and couldn't hurt someone even if I tried to use it on them.

I have no idea how that's supposed to work, though.

Questions aside, I cut through the Tyrant's Claw with Black and White. Then, I used Flash to zip right up to the Black Dragon God. I held back a little bit since I didn't know how fast I could go at full tilt, but I still moved faster than the Black Dragon God could follow. Suddenly, he opened his eyes wide at me in shock, evidently not expecting that move.

"What?!"

"Storm Slash!"

I twisted my torso, then unleashed a spinning attack at him with both swords.

"No... I swore I would never lose to a mere human again!" he spat as I cut into him. "I cannot lose!"

He didn't back down from my attacks, and I could feel something heavy and unpleasant behind his every word. The Black Dragon God breathed fire at me repeatedly, laying into me with claws and tail, but I managed to dodge his every move. Not only that, but I managed to get in more than a few counters, and eventually, he was left battered and bloody.

"Hahh... hahh...!"

"....."

Even as he looked about ready to collapse, he still had murder in his eyes. The flames that had once curled out of his jaws were now a sickly black smoke, but there was still a violent majesty to it.

Whoa... So this is the top of the fantasy food chain, a real dragon.

"I cannot... I will not lose!" he howled, spitting a ball of roiling flames at me.

It was faster than any attack I'd seen from it yet. Even with Mind's Eye, it was more than quick enough to pose a threat. I dodged out of the way with Flash and, with that same movement, activated the Secret Technique I'd picked up in my fight with Zeanos, Gale Thrust. I lunged at the dragon with both rapiers extended at lightning speed.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!"

Letting out a vicious roar, the Black Dragon God somehow managed to see me even at my speed and cast me a sharp glare. Like before, my Gale Thrust was interrupted, and I was totally paralyzed.

"Dammit! Not again...!"

"GRRAAAAGH!"

The force of its howl was enough to shake the entire room and send cracks running all across the walls. It took a heavy swipe at me with its massive claws. If it hit, I'd be good as dead.

Like hell, I'm dying here!

"Haahhhh!!"

I commanded my body to move.

Move! Move! Move, dammit! Move, or you die!

It seemed so simple, but somehow, that was all my body needed. Something deep inside me stirred me awake, and suddenly, I could move again. In the face of certain death, my body evolved to meet the challenge.

No, it's not just my body. My mind's never felt this light.

The fight gave me the spark I needed to rise to new heights. I wasn't done evolving—I had so much to go still. If I stopped, I'd be a nameless horror and nothing more. I had to somehow harness the ridiculous power sleeping inside me and make it my own.

As soon as I decided that, I could feel my body's inner limits come undone. I heard a familiar voice in my head.

>You acquired Pressure Immunity.

I didn't have time to puzzle over what that meant.

The Black Dragon God blinked at me in surprise as he realized I could move again. "Impossible!"

Still, he didn't stop attacking. Instead, his attack grew more fierce.

"GRAAARR! Dragon God's Claw!"

His claws, now bathed in light, came crashing down at me. Somehow, I knew Zealos' Skill Break wouldn't be enough to defend against it. It was just too powerful, too terrifying... too beautiful.

Instead, I just swung my swords. I swung to cut through those dazzling claws. To surpass them.

I didn't see a thing.

I didn't hear a thing.

I didn't say a thing.

I didn't think a thing.

As if in a trance, I simply swung. It didn't even occur to me to use a Skill or Secret Technique or anything. I could hear a voice echo in my head.

>You acquired Secret Technique: Blossoming Blades. You acquired Secret Technique: Sword And Soul.

In unison with that voice, I cut clean through his attack— “Hah!!”

—and reached the Black Dragon God.

“Kh!” he grunted.

I didn’t stop there, though. I swung countless times, not giving him even an instant’s opening to counterattack.

“GAAAAGH!” he howled, slumping to the ground. His body started evaporating into motes of light, just like defeating any other monster. “No... not again! I cannot lose again! I cannot fail to protect Him from you foul humans again...!” Tears brimmed in his massive eyes, regrets spilling from his mouth. “I wanted nothing more... than to serve him once more... and smile again... NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

Leaving behind that sorrowful wail, the Black Dragon God faded away entirely. All that was left was his drop items on the ground and his last words in my heart.

“He really must’ve hated humans... I wonder what happened to him?” I muttered in a rare moment of solemnity.

>You have levelled up. You have levelled up. You have levelled up. You have levelled up.

I could hear the level-up voice repeat itself over and over again in my head.

Come to think of it, this is my first time getting more than one level at once. I guess he was just that strong, huh?

It felt just plain wrong to celebrate now, though.

“Seiichi!” Seeing that it was safe now, Saria came running over to me. “Are you okay?”

“Huh? Yeah, I’m fine. I’m not hurt or anything.”

She didn’t seem reassured. “Why do you look so sad, then?”

“Huh?”

Do I?

Without waiting to check, I shook my head clear of the mind fog and turned my attention to Altria. I ran up to her.

“Looks like she’s still unconscious.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, though. It looks like she’ll be fine.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

Good. Now we can all go home... back to that guild full of perverts.

.....

...Wait.

I was less enthusiastic about going back after remembering who would be there to greet us. But I got a distinct feeling I had forgotten something.

.....

Suddenly, it came to me, and I desperately wished I could’ve just stayed ignorant.

“Uh, Saria? How do we get home?”

She blinked at me. “Huh?”

For a long moment, we stopped and stared at each other blankly.

“Oh, no!” we cried out in unison.

I have no idea how to get home! I mean, where even are we?! Man, I wish we’d thought of this stuff sooner!

“Shit! I didn’t even think about how we’ll get home! We can’t just teleport in reverse, can we?!”

“Wh-What do we do?!”

“Just calm down! In times like this, I was always told to... uh...”

Dammit, nobody ever told me what to do if I get teleported! Thanks a lot, common sense, you piece of shit!

We were both flat-out panicking. All my stoic seriousness was gone like it was never there. We couldn’t even ask Altria for help since she was still out cold.

“Okay... Okay, we got this. First, we need to check and see if either of us has any items that can help us out.”

“Roger that!” Saria saluted. “I have absolutely nothing!”

“Right, I forgot. Alright, watch over Altria-san, then!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

She didn’t even have an Item Box yet, let alone anything to put in it, so taking care of Altria was probably the best thing she could do now. I checked what I had on hand, but I didn’t have anything to help us get out of this dungeon.

“Oh, right! Maybe there’s something in the Black Dragon God’s drops that’ll help us!”

As a last resort, I could just break the whole maze, but since it seemed like we were somewhere underground, that might trigger a cave-in or something.

Instead, I turned my attention to the drop items. The first things I spotted were a couple of claws, scales, and the like.

ITEM DETAILS
BLACK DRAGON GOD’S SCALE: One of the Black Dragon God’s ultra-durable scales. Conventional weapons can’t even scratch it. Given its fantastic fire-resistant properties, extreme heat is needed for crafting. Relatively weak to cold and similar elements.
BLACK DRAGON GOD’S DEFIANT SCALE: An especially rare scale from the Black Dragon God. Highly flexible, despite being even harder than other scales. Its magic-resistant properties reduce enemy magic when forged into equipment. Other effects are identical to Black Dragon God’s Scales.
BLACK DRAGON GOD’S CLAW:

One of the Black Dragon God’s magnificent claws. Sharp enough to punch through heavy metal armor with ease. Boasts extreme hardness. It can only be forged with orichalcum and other special metals.
BLACK DRAGON GOD’S FANG: One of the curved fangs from the Black Dragon God’s massive jaws. It can pierce through virtually anything and cannot be removed once lodged in something.
BLACK DRAGON GOD’S BONE: An incredibly hard, thick bone. Depending on the forging process, it can be harder than orichalcum and surpass most Legend-tier equipment.
BLACK DRAGON GOD’S ORB: A gemstone from deep within the Black Dragon God’s body. It brims with mana, and if affixed to a weapon, it allows even regular attacks to defeat ethereal monsters with ease. Alternatively, it can be eaten to allow its vast mana to enhance all of the consumer’s physical attributes and all the magic they cast.

“Damn, that’s godly!”

Just the kind of stuff I’d expect a god to drop. And wait, why is the Orb’s tooltip trying to get me to eat it?! It’s a rock!

After stuffing all the Scales and the like in my Item Box, I picked up the Orb. It was a pretty little spherical gem, like a black pearl.

“Uh... I really don’t know if this is edible, though...”

Seriously, what now? I’m actually super curious.

.....

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I guess.”

I couldn’t resist in the end, and I popped it into my mouth. Surprisingly enough, it was cola-flavored.

Why, though?!

After a moment or two, it started dissolving in my mouth like a hard candy would.

“Well, uh... at least it was tasty.”

It certainly didn’t feel like my physical Stats got boosted, but I’d probably be able to figure out what changed later.

With that, I moved right on to the next drops.

“Let’s see... I guess those Stat spheres are next.”

The Black Dragon God packed a serious punch, so his Stats were probably crazy high. With that, I used Analysis on each of them.

BLACK DRAGON GOD			
MANA: 100,000	ATTACK: 200,000	DEFENSE: 200,000	AGILITY: 10,000
M-ATTACK: 200,000	M-DEFENSE: 200,000	LUCK: 3	APPEARANCE: 100,000

“Again?!”

How does even the dragon have a higher Appearance than me?! I mean, I guess he was kind of cool... He really should’ve put some of those points in Luck, though. He’s even worse than Zeanos was!

Looking at his Stats, I realized something.

“Hold up just a second. How did he deal so much damage to me if he only had a couple hundred thousand Attack?”

The more I thought about it, the less sense it made. The answer probably wasn’t in his Stats, then, but somewhere in his Skills. After absorbing the Stat spheres, I turned my focus to his Skill Cards.

SKILL CARD
ARMOR PIERCER: Use to acquire the Skill Armor Piercer.

SKILL CARD
PRESSURE: Use to acquire the Skill Pressure.

SKILL CARD
TYRANT’S CLAW: Use to acquire the Skill Tyrant’s Claw.

SKILL CARD
DRAGON GOD’S CLAW: Use to acquire the Skill Dragon God’s Claw.

MAGIC CARD
FIRE ELEMENT(ULTIMATE: Use to gain proficiency in Fire Magic.

MAGIC CARD
UNIQUE ELEMENT PURGATORY: Use to gain proficiency in Unique Element Magic, Purgatory.

“Hold up just a second! This is totally cheating!”

I had to re-read the cards to ensure I wasn’t seeing things, but they all got sucked into my body, regardless.

Once that was done, I decided to check out my Status.

HIIRAGI SEIICHI	
RACE: Human(Human)	
SEX: Male(Male)	
JOB: Enigma(Magic Swordsman).	
AGE: 17(17)	LEVEL: 15(15)
MANA: 1,698,300(100[Fixed])	ATTACK: 1,644,000(100[Fixed])
DEFENSE: 1,667,000(100[Fixed])	AGILITY: 1,690,000(100[Fixed])
M-ATTACK: 1,674,000(100[Fixed])	M-DEFENSE: 1,632,000(100[Fixed])
LUCK: 1,610,000(100[Fixed])	APPEARANCE: No Point Even Displaying It Now (100[Fixed])
EQUIPMENT: • Quality Shirt • Quality Pants • Quality Undershirt • Quality Underwear • Wise Simian’s Chain • Nixie-Cryst Shortsword • Bracelet of the Night • Aterprinceptite Choker • Necklace of Endless Love • Rapier of Festering Hatred • Rapier of Burgeoning Love • Azure Shoes	
UNIQUE SKILLS: • Instant Memorization • Perfect Recollection • Instant Learning	

• Instant Regeneration • Perfect Loot • Mind’s Eye • Evolution • Skill-Taker • Arrange
SKILLS—OFFENSE: • Cutter Kick • Twin-Fang Strike • Mighty Claw • Tyrant’s Claw • Dragon God’s Claw
SKILLS—IMMUNITIES: • Paralysis Immunity • Sleep Immunity • Confusion Immunity • Charm Immunity • Petrification Immunity • Bind Immunity • Poison Immunity • Fatigue Immunity • Pressure Immunity
SKILLS—MOVEMENT: • Flash
SKILLS—SPECIAL: • Greater Analysis • Ultra Compounding • Ultimate-Tier Tool Crafting • Detection • Disguise • Blend-In • Second Sight • Absorption • Compression • Universal Language Comprehension • Armor-Piercer • Pressure

MAGIC: • Daily Magic • Water Magic (Ultimate) • Dark Magic (Ultimate) • Earth Magic(Ultimate) • Dimensional Magic(Ultimate) • Fire Magic(Ultimate) • Unique Magic(Purgatory)
SECRET TECHNIQUES: • Gale Thrust • Piercing Light • Flowing Mist • Blossoming Blades • Sword And Soul
STYLES: • Zeford Duelling Style (Founder)
TITLES: • Stench Virtuoso • Man with a Gorilla Wife • Pinnacle of Existence • Unbounded One • Master of Men • Dragon Hunter • Godslayer
CURRENCY: 2,500,304,060G

“What am I even looking at here?!”

I barely recognize my own Stats anymore! Jeez, this is crazy, even if I’m just seeing things! I’m not a Nameless Horror anymore, but what kind of job is an ‘Enigma?’ I’m just so confused now! And c’mon, can my Appearance stop pranking me already? All I want is an actual number in there! Is that so hard?!

The most confusing thing was all the new entries under Unique Skills. So I used Analysis on them one by one.

SKILL DETAILS
EVOLUTION: A Skill unlocked by humans upon levelling up. Your body changes and improves to fit your situation. Passive.
SKILL-TAKER: A Skill unlocked by humans upon levelling up. Allows you to make any Skill an opponent uses your own. If the opponent is a monster, you can only take Skills you are physically capable of using. Passive.
ARRANGE: A Skill unlocked by humans upon levelling up. Alters Skills acquired via Skill-Taker to suit your body. Passive.

“Damn, humans are OP!”

This is just cheating! And wait, Evolution again? I thought I was over that stuff after eating the last Fruit of Evolution! If I gained these Skills just by levelling up, does that mean I might get more like them later? Human in this world isn’t another term for god or something, right? ‘Cause this stuff is just completely broken.

As I puzzled over just what my race meant, I moved on to the next new Skills.

SKILL DETAILS
UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION: Allows you to perfectly understand any language spoken by humanoids. It can also be used to understand some monster speech. Passive.
ARMOR PIERCER: Allows contact-based physical attacks to ignore enemy defense. It cannot be defended against with Skills but has no effect on ethereal opponents.
PRESSURE:

Stops any opponent with a level lower than your own in their tracks. Since the effect is mental instead of physical, Bind Immunity and similar Skills do not apply. It has no effect on opponents of a higher level.
TYRANT’S CLAW: Fires three slashes of pure energy at an opponent. It can be used with a weapon. The energy follows the opponent until it makes contact; the longer they dodge, the greater this Skill’s power.
DRAGON GOD’S CLAW: Unleashes an immensely powerful energy slash. As it deals Light-elemental damage, it is highly effective against undead. It can only travel in straight lines.

“Gack?!” I coughed up blood.

Damn, more of these stupid cheats! I should’ve expected as much from a god! I guess Universal Language Comprehension is from the Treasure Chest, though. It seems really useful, but it’s not as broken as the others. I bet I’ll end up relying on it sooner or later, though. More importantly, it looks like Armor Piercer is what allowed the Black Dragon God to hit me. And that weird paralysis effect was from Pressure. I can’t see myself using Pressure much myself, given how low my level is, but Pressure Immunity should come in handy.

Given how powerful they seemed, I wasn’t confident I could put them to good use, but it couldn’t hurt to try them out.

“Alright, next is the Magic section.”

With that, I used Analysis on the new entries.

SKILL DETAILS
EARTH MAGIC(ULTIMATE): You have mastery of Earth Magic. You can use any Earth Magic.
DIMENSIONAL MAGIC(ULTIMATE):

You have mastery of Dimensional Magic. You can use any Dimensional Magic.
FIRE MAGIC(ULTIMATE): You have mastery of Fire Magic. You can use any Fire Magic.
UNIQUE MAGIC(PURGATORY): Strengthens and modifies all Fire Magic. The Purgatory Magic's caster's flames will always prevail when confronted with other Fire Magic. It cannot be extinguished with Skills. It can only be put out with vast quantities of water or by the caster's will.

“Hahaha... Yeah, of course...”

No way I can use all these cheat skills. I mean, this is way too many to pick up at once. At least, this explains why I had trouble with the Black Dragon God's Fire Magic. Man, that's a sticky one.

It looked like for the Sandman and the Acrowolf, just getting over level 300 was enough for them to master their respective elements. I even had the Treasure Chest's mastery of Dimensional Magic now.

.....

“Wait, Dimensional Magic? That's it!”

I could feel a tingle run up my spine.

Right, I almost forgot!

“This might be it!”

I brought up a list of all Dimensional Magic in my head.

“Found it!”

Finding a few entries like Teleportation Magic and Teleport only took a moment.

“Saria! We can go home now!” I shouted.

“Really?! Yay!”

While Saria cheered, I quietly thanked the Treasure Chest.

All your hard work wasn't for nothing, buddy! You've really saved us. You're the best container anybody could ever ask for!

With that, it could hopefully rest in peace... even though I was technically the one who killed it.

“Whew... Now I can finish going over my Status in peace.”

I moved right on to the Secret Technique section.

SKILL DETAILS
BLOSSOMING BLADES: Unleashes countless slashes, slicing the opponent into shreds. It can also cut through both Skills and Magic.
SWORD AND SOUL: Maximizes the user's concentration and allows them to swing their sword as if it were an extension of their body. Any sword-based Skill or Secret Technique has its power doubled after use.

“Whoa. Yeah, seems pretty Secret Technique-y.”

I was feeling pretty good about those. After all, they were the fruits of my own labor. With that, I moved right on to the last section and my new Titles within.

SKILL DETAILS
DRAGONSLAYER: Awarded to those who slay top-tier dragons singlehandedly. All Stats are maximized in fights with dragons..
GODSLAYER: A title for those who have slain the gods themselves. All Stats are maximized in fights with gods..

“Well, that’s, uh... Something.”

I stared blankly at my Status.

I guess this is a little late to be pointing out now, but I guess there really are gods, huh? God sent me here, after all. I guess the Black Dragon God’s probably not on the same level as the God I know. Either way, though, I killed it! Yay me? I’m not going to get hit by divine wrath or anything now, right?

The thing that honestly worried me the most was how well I was taking all this. I must’ve snapped already.

“Alright, so now I’m up to date on my Status, and I know how we’re getting home now. Next up...”

I turned to look at the book and the large treasure chest still lying there.

“I bet that chest has some pretty godly loot in it, but honestly, I’m more interested in the Black Dragon God’s past.”

Given how much he loathed humans, he had to have some kind of history with them. After that fight, I only wanted to know more. Before I realized it, I’d already picked up the book.

What I didn’t know, though, was just how much food for thought that book would give me.

Chapter 19: To Be Human

I picked up the book that had the Black Dragon God's life written inside it.

No way it's catching me off-guard this time. I bet it has The Tale of the Black Dragon God on the cover, and it says it's non-fiction, right?

I wasn't stupid enough to get surprised by one of these books again. I looked at the cover.

The Black Dragon God's Biography.

"Biography?!" I shouted in surprise.

Where'd that come from? What happened to 'Tale'?! The other books have had weird titles so far, but this isn't even trying to be consistent! I guess it's not wrong, though.

With that, I opened it up and started reading.

Long ago, the Black Dragon God was worshipped in a certain human village.

I paused for a moment.

Worshipped? Er, I guess he was a god, so that makes sense.

I kept reading.

No matter what danger the villagers were confronted with, the Black Dragon God put his life on the line to protect them. The villager's faith in him was thus rooted not in fear but in admiration and respect.

With how much he seemed to hate humans, I couldn't imagine him doing anything for them.

As time passed, however, the villagers' faith waned. Even without their thanks, the Black Dragon God continued to shield them from all manner of disasters and monsters.

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However, the Black Dragon God's eventual 'reward' was all too cruel. The villagers plotted to slay the Black Dragon God to craft tools of war from his body, with which they would conquer the surrounding villages. On finding out, the Black Dragon God was furious. He did not wish to be thanked or idolized for his efforts, but to be treated with such blatant disrespect was another matter.

That made sense, honestly. I'd be pretty pissed if the people I was trying to protect betrayed me like that, too.

The Black Dragon God had all the powers that one would expect of a god. However, the villages enlisted the aid of experienced dragon hunters from across the realm in their fight against him. Unfortunately, the dragon slayers easily pinned him down and wounded him deeply.

I couldn't imagine anyone taking down the Black Dragon God that effortlessly. They must've really been at the top of their game.

The Black Dragon God could barely escape with his life, but he lacked the energy to even flee for long and was soon on the brink of death. Just as he was about to pass away, a man happened to pass by and offer his aid. That man was the demonkin who would later be known as the Demon King.

"Wait, what?!"

The Demon King again? Here?!

That was the last thing I was expecting.

The Demon King healed the Black Dragon God and suggested they travel together. The Black Dragon God was initially uncertain—demonkin or not; he looked just like those loathsome humans. Nonetheless, they were half-forced to travel together. Over the span of their long journey, the Black Dragon God came to admire the Demon King from the bottom of his heart.

That made sense. It sounded like the Demon King saved him in more ways than one.

The Demon King was on a journey to save demonkin across the realm who were suffering at the hands of the humans. But he never neglected humans who were similarly oppressed. He could never turn a blind eye to suffering. Sensing a kind of kinship in the Demon King, the Black Dragon God grew to admire him.

That didn't sound anything like the Demon Kings I knew.

Over time, countless demonkin gathered under the Demon King's protection until they had gathered enough people to found a country. As the Demon King's first friend and companion, the Black Dragon God lived in the land in peace. They welcomed an age of peace and tranquility.

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However, one group did not approve of the demonkin country's prosperity—the humans. They had long treated the demonkin as slaves and seeing such an 'inferior' people form a sovereign country sickened them. Between the loss of their obedient workforce and their sense of childish superiority, they could not accept the peace the Demon King brought his people.

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However, as badly as the humans wished to destroy the demonkin country, it was home to the Black Dragon God and many powerful demonkin. Not to mention the incredible power of the Demon King himself. They could not lay a finger on the realm—until, that is, one of the human countries perfected a Hero-summoning ritual.

That was where the ritual came from, then. I didn't know it had such a history.

There were two kinds of Hero-summoning rituals. The first summoned a Hero from another world. In contrast, the second gave a resident of their own world who possessed the right aptitudes a Hero's power. The human country chose the latter method, and the Hero marched on the demonkin country. Scores of demonkin were slaughtered. The Black Dragon God and even the Demon King himself stood against the Hero, but they were utterly powerless to resist. The Black Dragon God was forced to watch as the Demon King was cut down before his very eyes. In his immeasurable grief, he went on a rampage as if to destroy the entire rotten world. Even fueled by his rage; however, he could not defeat the Hero and was sealed away in the darkest depths of a labyrinth. There, he solemnly swore that he would never again lose something precious to him. Intent on becoming ever stronger, he began to feed on anything and everything that entered his new demesne. Even in the darkness, he never stopped dreaming

of serving the Demon King again and of being able to return to a life of peace one day.

Noooooo! I'm so sorry, Black Dragon God, buddy! I wasn't thinking of you at all!

I still couldn't forgive him for how badly he hurt Altria, but after reading that, I felt really guilty. If I'd just been a little more patient, then maybe we could've talked it out, just like with the Treasure Chest.

And honestly, the humans in that story were just awful. I wish they'd all die.

The more I thought about it, the greedier humans seemed to be, and I wasn't any exception. That guild was even worse, though, with how none of them was even trying to hide it.

One way or another, I understood how the Demon King and the Hero were related in this world now. I'd always associated more with the Hero as a fellow human, but after reading that, I wasn't so sure. My parents told me to try walking a mile in someone else's shoes and everything. But prejudices and 'common sense' always got in the way and prevented me from really doing it. Of course, the other side had its own reasons. Sure, some things just couldn't be forgiven, but it was worth trying if there was any shot at seeing eye-to-eye with someone else. Just sitting down and talking it out could do so much.

As I rediscovered just how important it was to think for myself, I finished reading the information sections of the book. And I let it turn into light and get sucked inside me. The biggest chunk of the Black Dragon God's experiences was its fights against the humans. Thanks to that, I felt like I had a better grasp of strategies for fighting them.

With that, I turned to the last item of business—the Treasure Chest.

"Alright... I wonder what's in there except money?"

Letting childish curiosity fill me, I opened the chest. Inside, I found a small bag and a black longcoat with a hood. I checked the bag first, and just as I thought, it was chock-full of gold and platinum coins.

I hope this world's okay with a little... er, a lot of inflation.

Trying to ignore just how much money was in there, I stuffed the whole bag into my Item Box.

Next, I pulled out the coat and spread it out. It was completely black, except for a bit of embroidery in gold thread on the back. It practically oozed style.

I'm getting some serious edgelord vibes from this, though...

Since the robe I got from that sheep was now a pile of ash, the coat was a godsend. I didn't want word of my black hair getting out, after all, and I had to admit it *did* look really cool. With that, I decided to use Analysis on it.

<DARK CONQUEROR'S LONGCOAT> Phantasm equipment. A coat that uses the Black Dragon God as a symbol of strength incarnate. Possesses both anti-heat and anti-cold properties, keeping the wearer's body temperature constant at all times. Given its impressive anti-impact and blade-proof properties, it nullifies damage from most conventional weapons. Boosts the power of all magic cast. Resists stains and other filth. Experience gained while wearing the Longcoat is greatly reduced.

"Whoa. That's good."

I didn't get how powerful it'd actually be in practice, but it definitely sounded good.

But that last line means I won't level up as easily, right? Not that I mind, given how strong I am already.

It was just about everything I could ask for in terms of equipment. It'd help keep my identity a secret, not to mention all its defense abilities and magic boost. And I wouldn't have to worry about levelling up so often. Of course, I couldn't afford to not wear it, really.

It'd be nice to get a feel for my current strength and how to hold back before I get too much stronger.

I tried it on and was surprised to find that it fit me perfectly.

Wow... everything I've found lately is pretty much perfect. Is it because my Luck is so high?

Still wondering about it, I headed over to where Saria was looking after Altria.

“Oh, Seiichi!” Saria called out to me. “Are you done over there?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Oh, okay. I guess that means Sheep-san isn’t coming this time.”

“Huh?”

Come to think of it, we did technically clear the dungeon, so it was a little weird to not see that sheep. He did mention that he’d only come out if we cleared a dungeon in the true sense of the word. For this place, it probably meant reuniting the Black Dragon God with the Demon King so that he could live a life of peace.

Sheesh, talk about a challenge.

Just as I was grimacing over how difficult that would be, there was a soft *POP* as something blew up in midair.

“What was that?!” I suddenly tensed up.

Saria shrugged, not a worried bone in her body. “I don’t know.”

Oh. I kinda feel stupid for being so jumpy now.

When I turned to check out where I heard the sound, I saw a single sheet of paper drifting to the ground.

“What’s this?” I hesitantly picked it up. On getting a closer look, I noticed it was covered in writing.

“What’s that?” Saria called over.

“Who knows? It looks like a letter.”

I think I’m getting déjà vu.

I started reading the letter aloud.

Hello there! It’s me, Sheep-san.

“I should’ve known!”

Somehow, this reminded me of that whole mess with the motorcycle helmet.

As I was yelling at the letter, Saria came over to peer over my shoulder at it.

“Really?!” She exclaimed. “It *is* from Sheep-san!”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Go on, read it!”

Her eyes were brimming with anticipation, so I cleared my throat and continued to read it aloud.

Congratulations on successfully clearing this dungeon. I suppose I should also applaud your decision to leave humanity even further behind.

Oh, shut it!

At any rate, it seems you were unable to clear this dungeon in the truest sense, so I will not be appearing in person. Come now, don't cry. I know how desperately you wished to see me again.

I was suddenly filled with the urge to punch him.

My, you're as senselessly violent as always, aren't you? But fret not. No matter how you may pretend to despise me, I know how you feel deep down. You don't have to be so coy with me.

Just shut the hell up! How can he read my mind, anyways?!

I am a sheep, after all.

That makes no fucking sense!

Anyhow, I simply wanted to congratulate you on successfully clearing this dungeon. I sincerely hope that you will continue to progress with this same vigor. I eagerly anticipate the day when you not only graduate from mere humanity but cease to be alive in any sense that mere mortals can comprehend. Oh, and give my regards to Saria-sama, will you? Love, your idol Sheep-san.

.....

“Damn... Nothing throws him off, huh?”

“I'm glad he's doing well!”

Yeah, I'm 'glad' too. I'd be even happier if somebody taught that little freak a lesson.

I noticed, however, that it wasn't quite the end of the letter yet.

P.S.: I'll be on vacation for the next short while, so please refrain from clearing any more dungeons in that time.

“How about you do your damn job?!”

It was somehow all too easy to imagine that creep sheep in a Hawaiian shirt and cheap shades on some tropical island giving me a cheesy thumbs-up.



“I hope Sheep-san enjoys his vacation!” Saria said with a smile.

“Really? I hope he drowns!”

I mean, c’mon, Saria. He’s just slacking off!

I took a moment to calm down.

“Hahh... Well, whatever. The point is, he’s not coming this time.”

“Yeah... That’s kind of sad.”

I wish we never see him again... er, wait, no. That’d mean I can’t punch him.

“Anyhow,” I said, “we’ve gotten everything we can from this place. Now we’ve just gotta get back.”

“Yep! Let’s go!”

With that, I got ready to cast some Teleportation Magic.

“I’m gonna take us back, so hold on tight, okay?”

“Okay!” She enthusiastically grabbed the hem of my robe.

“Alright. Now all that’s left is Altria-san...”

I’d never used Teleportation Magic before, so I didn’t know the specifics or anything. But I figured it worked the same as the trap that took us to the dungeon. In other words, I had to be touching them both. The circumstances were a little different on the way here, but it should work the same.

I envisioned the place we’d left, a short way outside the city gates. After all, I didn’t want to teleport into the middle of town and cause an uproar. Since we’d have to walk a ways, I opted to pick Altria up in a princess carry.

“Wow... I never thought I’d get to carry two different girls like this in one day.”

I couldn’t pick Altria up piggyback-style with Saria holding on behind me, and hugging her head-on would be a bad idea. Just thinking about it was starting to make me feel light-headed.

C’mon, this isn’t the time for that!

“Alright, I’m taking us head back, then!”

“Go ahead!”

With that, I activated the Dimensional Magic transfer, taking all three of us back to the area outside the Capital.

※ ※ ※

“Wh-Whoa...”

I was so shocked by my own spell that I had to take a moment to stop and stare.

“Are we there?” Saria asked from behind me.

Altria was still nestled in my arms, and the tall walls of Terbelle were right in front of us.

“I did it,” I mumbled. “We’re back.”

I was honestly so scared that I had my eyes shut tight while I was casting, so I didn’t know exactly how we were teleported. Now I wished I hadn’t.

“Well then,” I said as I rolled my shoulders. “I guess we’re still technically supposed to defeat a Slime to pass the test, but since Altria-san isn’t even awake to see it, I guess we’ll just go home for now.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Saria replied. “It sure has been a while, though, huh?”

“Huh? A while since what?”

“Hmm... We spent all that time in that maze, y’know? It feels like we haven’t been back to the Capital in forever.”

“Yeah... I guess you’re right.”

It hadn’t even been a full day, but it felt so much longer than that. A lot happened in such a short time, so that made some sense.

“Anyways, we may as well head back to the guild.”

“Okay!”

With that, we started walking towards the city gates. We made sure to be careful just in case any more traps were lying around, but fortunately, our

worries were unfounded.

After a while of chatting with Saria, Altria moaned in my arms.

“Hngh... Hm?”

“Oh, Altria-san!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, good, you’re awake!”

Altria opened her eyes and looked around blearily.

“The hell are we...?”

“Back outside Terbelle,” I replied. “We made it back just fine.”

“Oh, good,” she muttered and closed her eyes again. After a brief moment of silence, her eyes flew open again. “Wait, the hell?! We’re back?!”

“Yeah. Look right over there.”

I pointed at the city walls, and her jaw dropped.

“Y-You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me...” She continued to stare for a few seconds before freezing. “Huh? The hell are you doing so close to me? And why am I looking up at you?”

“That’s because, uh... I’m carrying you.”

“Huh?” She blinked in surprise as she went over my words in her head a few times. Finally, it seemed to click. “The *fuck*?! Put me down!!”

“Wh-Whoa! Stop squirming! I might drop you!”

“Good! I’m too heavy for you anyways!”

“Huh? You’re actually pretty light, y’know. Don’t worry about me.”

“Wh-What the...?!” She turned beet red, then started flailing harder. “Screw you! I’m worried about me!”

She really is super light, though.

I could understand that she must’ve felt embarrassed to be carried by a guy like that, but she had just taken a bad beating from the Black Dragon God. She probably didn’t have her strength back yet. That was the only reason for the princess carry, honestly.

“J-Just drop me!” she shouted, punching me wherever she could reach. “Drop me, or I swear I’ll punch you!”

“Next time, say that *before* you start hitting me!”

Since she seemed to hate it that much, I let her half-squirm out of my arms. Even though she hit me a few times, I barely felt it.

Thank you, stupidly high Stats!

“Hahh... Hahh...” Altria stood there for a few seconds, shoulders heaving as she glared at me. After she caught her breath, she turned to walk away.

“O-Oof...” Before she could even finish her first step, though, she stumbled.

On the spur of the moment, I stepped forward to catch her, supporting her at the shoulder. “You okay?”

I knew it. She’s still too weak to walk right now.

“Don’t be like that!” Saria scolded her. “You might be all healed up now, but you need to rest! Let Seiichi carry you, okay?”

Altria’s eyes grew wide. “Let him *what*?! L-Like hell, I’m letting him do something that embarrassing!”

“But he’s been carrying you this whole time.”

“Gaaaah! Don’t remind me! Th-That wasn’t my fault!”

“Doesn’t matter! Seiichi’s carrying you, and that’s final!”

“B-But—”

“No buts!”

Altria still seemed determined to resist, but after seeing how unusually serious Saria was being, she just let out a heavy sigh.

“...Fine. Fine! Have it your way! If you wanna carry me so badly, then carry me, dammit!”

Saria nodded and smiled. “Good!” She looked up at me. “Okay, Seiichi, you know what to do!”

“Uh... Do I?”

I shot a look at Altria. She was looking daggers up at me, her cheeks bright pink.

“Y-You heard her!” Altria barked. “Are you Seiichi, or aren’t you, dumbass?!”

“Yeah, that’s me, I guess.”

I still didn’t get what she was so angry about, but if I was going to carry her, it had to be now before she changed her mind again. I scooped her up in a princess carry.

She turned a shade redder in my arms and looked away. “D-Damn you.”

Wow... She totally looks like the cool and composed type, but she’s got a really cute side to her. I’ll never admit it to her, though. She’d rip my head off.

With that, we started walking back towards Terbelle. For a while, we were all quiet. It wasn’t exactly an awkward silence, but with Altria outright refusing to look at me, I didn’t know how to start a conversation with her.

Er... This is kinda awkward, after all.

Saria seemed to be in high spirits, at least, and every once in a while, she’d look over at the two of us and grin.

After a long while, Altria suddenly broke the silence.

“...Sorry.”

“Huh?”

That took me totally off guard.

Why is she apologizing all of a sudden?

“I mean...” she muttered, “sorry for wrapping you two up in my bad luck again.”

“Oh, is that all? Don’t worry about—”

“Screw that! I *will* worry about that shit!”

I suddenly tensed up. Saria had gone ahead a ways, and she didn’t seem to hear.

“You realize I could’ve gotten you both killed, right?!” Her voice was brimming with anger. “Don’t pretend that it’s okay! Don’t you *dare*!”

“.....”

Okay, yeah, that was on me for not taking her more seriously.

I couldn’t imagine what she was going through, but I must’ve touched a nerve. I didn’t say anything, waiting for her to continue. Instead, I heard her mutter something I couldn’t catch, and a translucent screen popped up in the air in front of us.

“This’s my Status,” she finally said. “Go on, look.”

“B-But...”

“Just do it. Besides, you’ve probably guessed it already.”

Hesitantly, I looked at the Status without putting her down.

ALTRIA GREM	
RACE: Human	
SEX: Female	
JOB: Warrior	
AGE: 19	LEVEL: 123
MANA: 100	ATTACK: 5,000
DEFENSE: 3,824	AGILITY: 4,200
M-ATTACK: 345	M-DEFENSE: 2,221
LUCK: -2,000,000(Calamity-Borne)	APPEARANCE: Immeasurable

“What?!”

I was struck speechless. Her Appearance being ranked at ‘Immeasurable’ made sense—she really was that pretty, after all. It was a bit of a shock that her Stats were much lower than mine at level 123, but I could understand that. The issue, of course, was her Luck.

How can she have negative two million? And is that a Title there beside it?

As I tried to puzzle it out, Altria started explaining.

“My Luck’s pretty insane, huh? It’s all thanks to that little Calamity-Borne thing beside it.”

“Calamity-Borne?”

“Yeah. I’ve been cursed with it since I was born. All it does is turn my Luck negative, but honestly, that’s enough.”

Oh, so that explains it.

If she didn’t have that curse, she’d be even luckier than me. I still didn’t understand why she was cursed, though.

As if reading my mind, she began to explain.

“Honestly, I’ve got no clue why I’m like this. That curse has almost killed me more times than I can count, but I can live with that. The worst part is it doesn’t just hurt me. My bad luck hurts anyone who gets too close to me.”

“Oh...”

“Everyone in Terbelle knows, but fortunately, I know a guy who put up a kind of barrier around me while I’m in the city. The people who get close to me still get unlucky, sure, but the city as a whole gets spared. That’s why I don’t travel to other towns, period. If I did, there’s no telling what would happen to them.”

So for her, the real curse is how it hurts others.

Just thinking about it caused frustration to well up from deep inside my chest.

How come she has to suffer so much when she’s this nice?!

“That’s why nobody gets close to me,” she continued. “Sure, it sucks to be alone, but it’s a hundred times better than hurting people.”

“.....”

“There’s no breaking my curse, either. Even the guy who put the barrier up for me did some research and came up empty. As long as I live, I’ll continue to spread pain and misfortune to whoever gets too close. I’m real human trash, huh? You guys didn’t deserve to get wrapped up in my mess. I don’t know how I could ever apologize to you two.”

With that, she dropped her gaze so that I couldn’t see her face.

Damn, I’m stupid. She was so worried this whole time, and I was too dense to even notice. Worse, I hurt her by taking her apology so lightly... I wish I could go back in time and slug myself.

The weirdest thing was that I was somehow happy that Altria had opened up to me about this. It had always bothered me that she kept avoiding Saria and me for no apparent reason, but now I finally knew why. I now had a thing or two I wanted to tell her myself. I didn’t know how much good it would do her—it might even hurt her, depending on how she took it. Even so, I had to let her know.

“I don’t consider meeting you to be bad luck at all,” I finally said.

“Huh?”

“Not just me, either—I know Saria feels the same way.”

“.....”

“Sure, this time was kind of trouble, and we could’ve all died. But we didn’t. Both Saria and I are perfectly fine.”

“Y-Yeah, but—”

“It was touch and go, sure; I won’t try to deny that. But even so, the time we spent with you during this exam made it more than worth it. It was wonderful—I mean it.”

“.....”

“You said you’re worried you’ll bring us bad luck, right?”

She nodded slightly, still not looking up at me.

“Well, I think luck is relative, anyways,” I continued. “If you think something’s bad luck, then, of course, you’ll be miserable. On the other hand, if you feel happy even in the worst situation imaginable, then I’d call that good luck. Saria and I don’t regret having you oversee our test, not for a second. This isn’t bad luck. No matter what you say, I refuse to believe it.”

“.....”

I could feel her tense up.

“You’re not trash at all. So please, stop being so rough on yourself.”

“.....”

She didn’t move a muscle for the longest time.

I didn’t make her angry, right? I hope I didn’t offend her.

I only told her the truth, though, and I couldn’t stand to keep it bottled up any longer than I already had.

Silence fell upon us once more. Then, apparently noticing our seriousness, Saria ran up to us from where she was frolicking.

“Altria-san!” she shouted, running right up to her. “Here’s a biiiiiig hug!”

She glomped onto Altria, hugging us both tight to her.

Altria’s eyes flew open in shock. “What the hell?!”

Saria beamed. “If you’re feeling sad, then I’ll share some of my happiness with you! Nobody as nice as you deserves to be sad!”

A chuckle escaped my lips. Even though Saria didn’t hear a thing we were talking about, she seemed to see through Altria’s gloom in a heartbeat. It looked like, even in human form, she kept every bit of her animal insight. Not only that, she had a natural talent for cheering people up, even though she didn’t seem to realize it herself.

Altria didn’t say a thing the whole time she was being hugged, and we didn’t talk much the rest of the way back. Unlike before, though, it was a calm and relaxed silence.

Before too long, we all arrived in front of the city gates.

“Huh?” Right in front of the gates, a small crowd had formed and was running around and shouting.

“I wonder what happened?” Saria wondered aloud, noticing the commotion.

I didn’t get it, but we weren’t left wondering for long. A familiar face in the group noticed us and came running over. After a moment, I realized it was Claude, the guard.

“Hey! Seiichi! Oh, and Saria-ojouchan and Altria are with you, too!”

“Hey, Claude. What’s going on?”

There was a look of desperation on his face.

“The hell did you guys go?! We were worried sick, dammit!”

“Huh?”

I don’t get it.

“It’s been three whole days since you went Slime-hunting! Seriously, what the hell happened to you?!”

“Whoa! Hold up just a second!”

I motioned for him to stop while I tried to digest his words.

Wait, three days? I must be hearing things...

“Are you sure about that?” I asked. “We just left this morning.”

I can’t believe this.

Claude furrowed his brow. “Did you hit your head or something? I told you, it was three days.”

“.....” All three of us were quiet.

Did we really spend that much time in that weird maze? Really?

He seemed to notice how confused we all were, and the irritation on his face turned to relief.

“Well... Anyhow, I’m glad to see you’re all in one piece. We were just about to go looking for you, actually.”

“Really?” I almost couldn’t believe it. “So what, you’re saying all the people at the gate right now were going to come find us?”

That can’t be it, though, right?

Claude nodded. “‘Course we were. What, wouldn’t you be worried if someone you knew vanished off the face of the earth?”

“.....” Again, all three of us were struck speechless.

I can’t believe that they’re all here just to find us.

Claude turned to address the search party. “Hey, guys! They’re all safe! Thanks for coming, though!”

“Really? That’s great!” one of them shouted.

“Damn, you had us worried!” came the second.

“Don’t you three go disappearing again, you hear?” called another.

With that, the group smiled and headed back into the city.

Claude stretched. “Alright, now that you guys are all safe, I guess I should get back to work.” However, he stopped as if remembering something and turned back to us. “Oh, right. The folks down at the guild are worried sick about you, so you’d better go let them know you’re okay.”

With that, he walked back to the gate.

Wow... And here I thought he’d say something about the way I’m carrying Altria.

As hard as it was to believe it, we all finished our entrance paperwork and passed through the gate. On the way to the guild, there was no end to the people who looked relieved to see Altria back in town, although most of them also seemed confused about why I was carrying her.

Before long, we arrived at our destination. Oddly enough, I couldn’t hear any of their deranged screams, but I could still tell there was quite the clamor inside. Puzzled, we entered the guild but stopped dead in our tracks when we saw what was happening.

“Hey, you guys find anything yet?” one of them shouted.

“Nope, still nothin’!” came the reply.

“I got something!” another yelled. “I found someone who said they saw a Slime Altria and the others fighting disappear! That was three days ago, though.”

“I interviewed no small number of young girls,” came a familiar voice, “but regrettably, I only learned the location of their favorite sweets shops.”

“Gather info normally next time!” the first three barked at him.

“S-Sorry.”

Aside from a few perverts who seemed just as crooked as ever, almost everyone in the guild was poring over all kinds of papers and reports. It was so different from the last time I’d seen them; I couldn’t hide my shock.

At that moment, Gustle noticed us.

“Hm? Ohh! Altria-kun, Seiichi-kun, Saria-kun!” Everyone stopped to look at us as his voice rang throughout the guild. He ran up closer, looking down at us concernedly. “We were so worried! What happened to you?!”

“I wish we knew,” I replied. “Somebody put a bunch of Teleportation Magic traps around. After stepping on one by accident, we were all whisked off to some maze. After that, well, we eventually managed to make it back okay.”

There were enough holes in my story to give Swiss cheese a run for its money, but Gustle didn’t seem to mind. He let out a heavy sigh of relief.

“I see... Well, at least you’re all safe.” He looked down at Altria before continuing in a mumble. “It seems like a certain someone might have pushed herself too hard, though.”

“.....” Altria didn’t reply.

I couldn’t wait any longer to voice the question that had been eating at me since we returned.

“So, uh... What’s everyone doing?”

“Hm?” Gustle looked back up at me. “We were gathering information so that we could figure out where you went.”

“Huh? Why?”

The question slipped out before I could stop it, and Gustle only shook his head.

“Don’t give me that. You’re our comrades in arms! Of course, we’d try to find you!”

From the look on his face, I gathered that I had just asked a stupid question.

As we were standing in the doorway, Eris came out of the throng of adventurers with a stack of documents in her arms.

“Gustle-san, these are the most recent...” She trailed off as soon as she saw us. “Altria-san?!” She dropped everything to run over to us, pushing past Gustle and sending him flying in the process. “Are you alright?! Can you walk?!”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine,” Altria replied awkwardly.

Eris took a deep breath, hand to her chest. She even seemed to be tearing up a little. “Oh, I’m so glad to hear that.”

I guess we really were missed, huh.

Gustle turned to address the whole guild. “Altria-kun has returned, everyone! Hahaha, even my muscles are flexing with happiness!”

Cheers echoed throughout the guild.

“Nice! Now I can finally go back to stealing shit!” I heard one person shout.

“Yes, what splendid news! I believe I’ll take a lap around the palace in the nude to celebrate!” came another voice.

“And I shall inform all the good little girls of the Capital!” a third voice shouted in glee.

“YEAH! Let’s break this whole dumb place to celebrate!” roared another.

“No breaking stuff, seriously!” shouted about half the room.

In an instant, chaos gripped the guild again. Eris was already back in her BDSM harness, whipping some random guy, and Gustle was striking poses on a table.

I rolled my eyes at the scene, but one thing was clear now. The Black Dragon God taught me just how messy and selfish humans are. In fact, maybe it's that very selfishness that makes us human. The only difference with the people here was that they faced their desires head-on and embraced them. Of course, humans weren't the cleanest, prettiest, or most reasonable creatures around. Maybe we were doomed to kill ourselves off. But even so, humans were warm and kind. I was never able to accept that back in my old world. Sure, Kenya and Shouta tried to be nice to me, but I pushed them away. I must've been so lonely back then. I wasn't technically alone, but I may as well have been, and nobody could live like that for long. The last thing I wanted was for Altria to suffer like that.

I turned down to look at her in my arms.

"See, Altria-san? All those people you said you'd brought misfortune to—they're all happy to see you."

"....."

"You matter to more people than you think. You're surrounded by kindness and warmth. Sure, they're a messy bunch, but still."

"....."

"Please, try to trust them. Rely on them. Stop trying to take on everything by yourself and just look around you—look at all the people who are downright overjoyed to see you again."

"....."

"You're not some bringer of bad news. It's kinda embarrassing to say it out loud, but... you're loved."

"Huh...?"

"Let me say it again. You're not bad luck. You're not the Calamity you think you are."

"But—"

"You're kind and caring, like a big sister, even if you can be a handful sometimes. Not me or Saria... Heck, probably nobody in this guild has a problem

with your bad luck. We all love you as you are.”

“.....”

“You didn’t bring misfortune to any of us. Sure, there was some bad luck along the way—but more than that, we’re lucky to know you.”

“.....”

I ended up stumbling over myself a lot more than I wanted to, even though what I wanted to say was so clear in my head.

Who knew talking about your feelings was this hard?

Just as I was trying to figure out if anything I’d said had gotten through to her, she suddenly broke out of my arms and ran outside.

.....

Wait, she what?

“H-Hold up! Why are you running?!” I called after her.

It came as such a shock I couldn’t even react at first.

Did I say something to make her mad?

As I puzzled over it, Saria shot me a pouty look.

“Don’t just watch her leave, Seiichi! Run after her!”

“Huh? But what if—”

“It’ll be okay! You got through to her. Just trust me!”

How are girls this strong? Man, I’m a total shame to men everywhere.

Thanks to her, my head was clear, and I knew what to do now. I didn’t have to think. All I had to do now was follow her.

“Okay!” I nodded. “I’ll be back later!”

Saria nodded back. “I’ll be waiting!”

With that, I ran out of the guild in search of Altria.

Chapter 20: The Calamity's Happiness

“**W**here’d she go?” After leaving the guild, I couldn’t see her anymore. “Damn... There’re way too many people here...”

The crowds in the Royal Capital were way too huge. Once you got split up from someone, it seemed like it’d be impossible to find them again.

“Oh, right! I have my Detection Skill!”

With Detection, I could pick up on anything living within a 550-yard radius. It couldn’t hurt to try, at least. So I activated it—and I immediately felt like kicking myself.

Damn... why didn’t I think this through? I can figure out if there’s anything living in the area, sure...

“...But you can’t identify what they are, dumbass!”

In that case, my only real option was to ask around. If the Treasure Chest and Black Dragon God taught me anything, it was that communication is important. With that, I called out to a woman who happened to be passing by.

“Excuse me? I’m looking for someone.”

“Oh, dear! Is there any way I can... My word, is that you, Seiichi-san?”

“Huh? Adriana-san?!”

By some stroke of luck, that woman happened to be the wife of the count and owner of a really big ‘dog,’ Adriana.

Small world, huh.

“So, what can I help you with?” Adriana asked.

“Actually, I’m trying to find Altria-san. Have you seen her come through here?”

“Altria-chan? I can’t say I have.”

“Oh... Okay.”

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t help you, dear.”

“N-No, that’s okay. Thanks anyway.”

“You’re very welcome!” With that, Adriana turned to leave, but she stopped as if remembering something. She then turned back to face me. “Oh, right, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard about Altria-chan’s... condition by now, haven’t you?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“In that case, I have a request to make of you.”

“Huh?”

I blinked in surprise, and Adriana continued with a smile.

“Could you please continue to be friends with her? I know she looks rough around the edges, but she’s a rather delicate little dear and the kindest girl you’ll ever meet.”

“Yeah... I picked up on that already.”

“In that case, please, stay by her side.”

“Stay by... what?” Her words didn’t quite click.

She let out a refined chuckle. “If you don’t understand, then don’t let it bother you. All I ask is that you care for her, just like you are now, searching for her.”

“I still don’t get what you’re talking about, but don’t worry. Altria-san means a lot to me already, so—”

Adriana’s smile deepened a little as she cut me off. “In that case, you’d best continue looking for her, Prince Charming!”

“C’mon, I’m no prince-anything.” I smiled thinly at her.

A short while later, I was back on the hunt for Altria.

“I guess I should try asking someone again...”

Just as I thought, I suddenly remembered I had a little something perfect for just this situation.

“Right... I know what’ll help me! The Compass Stone!”

I pulled the small silver rock out of my Item Box. If I knew what direction she was in, I could beeline it right over the rooftops towards her. I used it, and it floated into the air and started drifting off.

“Alright, so she’s that way.”

As I put the Stone back into my Item Box, I remembered what direction that was.

“Huh? She’s not back there, is she?”

There was only one way to find out. I started running in the direction it pointed me.

※ ※ ※

“I knew it.”

My destination was just what I’d guessed it to be.

“This is where I finished that first quest, isn’t it?”

It was the same abandoned lot where I’d destroyed that old building. Even without using any of my Skills, I could tell there wasn’t anyone around. All I could see was the pile of rubble I’d left from that one careless punch.

“.....”

Without saying a word, I activated Detection. Since the area was almost totally abandoned, I found Altria in an instant. I walked toward the signal, and there she was.

“Altria-san?”

“.....”

She didn’t reply. She was huddled in the shadows of the rubble, knees hugged tight to her chest. Her shoulders twitched a little when she heard my voice, but

she didn't even turn to look at me. I sat down close to her, but I couldn't see her expression since her back was facing me.

I didn't know what to say to her. But then again, I didn't know why she suddenly ran away, either. Instead, I waited until she was ready to talk to me. She seemed to understand what I was doing since she addressed me in a thin voice a moment later.

"Hey... Seiichi?"

"What is it?"

"I'm... I'm not worthless?"

"No. You're not."

"But... I'm such a pain to be around."

"Absolutely not. I swear."

"You're not lying, right? You don't hate me?"

"Of course not. We all love you—Saria, Gustle, Eris-san, everyone. You mean so much to all of them. I really like you, too."

I tried to sound as serious as possible. I was dead serious, after all. Altria mattered so much to everyone. Of course, it was incredibly embarrassing to tell her I liked her like that, but it was the truth, and she'd never know unless I told her. Some things needed to be said aloud to have any meaning.

I could see Altria ball up further, her shoulders trembling.

"Y-Yeah... Okay..."

"....."

"I always loved having you guys around, but... I never thought you guys would feel the same about me."

"....."

"I-I'm just..." She choked up, and I could tell she was crying as quietly as she could manage.

Uh-oh. What do I do now?

Kenji or Shouta was probably used to this kind of thing. But unfortunately, I blazed a lonely path of loserdom back on Earth; I didn't have any practice comforting women.

I've gotta do something, though.

Having a million cheat powers was cool and everything, but I couldn't save anyone on an emotional level. When it came to what was really important, I was still as powerless as ever.

At that time, though, Adriana's words came back to me.

Please, stay by her side.

I still didn't get what that meant.

So like, stick with her physically? Or emotionally? How am I supposed to do it emotionally, though? Damn, this is confusing.

Fortunately, I remembered how Saria did it.

Altria-san! Here's a biiiiiig hug!

"....."

As soon as I remembered it, I could feel my body in motion, as if Saria was directing my every move. I hugged Altria tightly from behind.

"Huh?!"



When Saria hugged Altria back then, I was moved by how she had seen through Altria's anxieties so easily, but this hug meant more than that. Altria was probably happy now, but at the same time, confused to be released from all that stress so suddenly. She always believed she was a bearer of bad news, but now, she knew how loved she was. Now, she had to figure out how she was supposed to act around people from now on, which worry probably had a chokehold on her now.

I felt I had a pretty good idea of how important it was to a kid just to have their parents around when they were worried. Parents could wrap their kids up in warmth and love in a heartbeat and make everything feel better. And if there's anything Saria's stint at the orphanage taught me, it's that she had a knack for motherhood. When Saria hugged Altria, she did more than see through Altria's anxiety. She gave her the warmth and comfort she needed.

Now, Altria was going through that stress again, and I was the only one here for her. Maybe I had no right to butt into her problems like this. Maybe I wouldn't be any help at all. But if there was anything I could do to let her know I was on her side, I had to do it.

"It's okay," I whispered. "Even if you have no idea what to do now, I'm here for you, always. I'll be here to wipe your tears away. Until the day you can truly smile from the bottom of your heart, I swear I'll never leave your side."

"What the...?! U-uh... um..."

.....

...Hold on a second.

I said whatever I thought would help her calm down and copied what Saria did. Sure, she wasn't crying anymore, but I could see her ears were bright red against her silver hair.

Come to think of it, I just said some pretty heavy stuff, didn't I?

I could feel my own face grow hot. I bet I was redder than a tomato.

Calm down, Seiichi! I need to cool off and apologize! Man, I crossed a line there... How's any of that supposed to make her feel better?!

...H-Holy shit, she smells good.

Dammit, I need to calm down! CALM DOWN! W-Wait, I don't smell right now, right? R-Right?!

I double-checked my Stench Virtuoso Title to ensure I had no B.O. whatsoever. But I could still feel the anxiety building up inside me.

Somebody, anybody! I need a hug, STAT!

As I was panicking, Altria tapped on my arm.

“Uh, Seiichi? I’m good now.”

“Huh? O-Oh, right! Sorry!”

I quickly put some distance between us. Altria was turned around to face me, and she was super red and fidgeting.

“Th-That, uh... That was embarrassing.”

“.....”

I was embarrassed too!

Though I resisted the urge to shout it out.

“B-But, uh... thanks.” Her cheeks turned a shade redder as she looked up at me through her thick lashes. “I needed that.”

“.....”

I thought my time with Saria had given me at least a little mental resistance to beautiful women. This, though, was a whole different ballpark.

I-I’m gonna die. I’m dead. I have zero resistance to women, nope.

Seeing her like that, I couldn’t help but fall hard for her. For a few moments, we were both awkwardly quiet.

At least she’s not avoiding people anymore... That’s good?

The root problem remained—her curse was still as strong as ever. A Luck of negative two million was nothing to shake a stick at. And as long as she had that nasty Calamity-Borne effect, she’d probably never get a real break.

There's gotta be something I can do, dammit! Think, me, think! If only her Stat wasn't negative.

.....

...If only it wasn't negative?

"That's it!"

Suddenly, it hit me.

I know how to break her curse!

"Altria-san! Give me your hand!"

Her brow suddenly furrowed. "My what?"

"Please!"

After a moment's hesitation, she held her left hand out to me. I wasted no time pulling a certain piece of equipment out of my Item Box.

"H-Hold up." Her voice was thick with confusion. "The hell are you trying to pull?"

I barely even heard her, however. My focus was on the Ring of Misfortune, the Treasure Chest's only drop, as I was trying to put it on her hand.

Uh... Which finger should I try it on? Come to think of it, though, it doesn't change the size to match the wearer...

There was a chance it didn't fit on any of her fingers.

Y'know what, screw that! It's down to my Luck versus hers, and I'll leave whatever negative amount is left over to this ring!

I started trying it on each of her fingers, one by one.

"S-Seiichi?"

I looked up to see that not only was her face bright red, but tears were also starting to gather in her eyes. There was no telling how smitten I'd get if I kept looking at her face, so I focused on the ring and only the ring.

"Uh..."

“Let’s see the thumb... nope, too small. Your index finger’s a bit too big, too... Middle finger, here we go! And nope, doesn’t fit.”

I guess that leaves the ring finger and the pinky, huh.

I could tell at a glance that the ring was too big for the pinky, so I bet it all on the ring finger. With that, I slipped it on her.

“What the hell?!” Altria yelled in surprise.

Yeah! A perfect fit!

I started grinning under my hood.

The Ring of Misfortune gave off a brilliant shine at that moment.

“Whoa, what?!” I exclaimed.

“Huh?!”

Even though it was too bright to look at, it didn’t hurt my eyes. If anything, it seemed warm and friendly as it enveloped Altria. After a moment, the light died down, leaving only a faint twinkle in the little purple gem embedded in the band. It looked almost identical to how it did before, but something about it felt different. Curious, I decided to use Analysis to check.

<RING OF FORTUNE> Phantasm equipment. A gift from the Treasure Chest to a couple of one heart and mind. Negates the wearer’s curse and doubles their Luck.

Treasure Chest! I love you, man! You’ve saved us again!

I didn’t quite get what the tooltip meant by ‘of one heart and mind,’ but either way, Altria was saved.

“Guess what?!” I enthused. “Your curse is gone!”

“...What?”

“Look, I’ll explain later! For now, just check your Status!”

Altria seemed a little put off by my enthusiasm, but she did as I asked.

“What...?!” She looked at her Status in shock. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Don’t gimme that shit... This can’t be real! How the hell is this day continuing to get better?! First, everyone comes out and tells me they don’t hate me, a-and now... I’m dreaming! I gotta be!”

The more she thought about it, the more confused she seemed to get. To drive the point home, I took her by the hand and looked her square in the eye.

“This isn’t a dream. This is real. You’re not a Calamity anymore!”

“.....”

“Look at this ring! This is what got rid of your curse!”

I pointed out the Ring of Misfortune—er, the Ring of Fortune on her hand and repeated.

“You don’t need to worry anymore. This ring will take all the unhappiness you’ve suffered your entire life up until now and make you that much happier. I swear I’ll be right here with you. I’ll support you, body and soul.”

Her gaze went from the ring to my face, growing visibly more flustered with every passing second.

“D-D-Dammit!”

Suddenly, she broke free of my grasp and bolted.

.....

...What?

“H-Hold on! Where are you going?!” I was both shocked and confused. “What? Did I say something weird?”

I paused to take stock of what had happened. I comforted her when she was feeling down. Then, I pulled out a ring and put it on the ring finger of her left hand. Then, just when she was getting all confused, I said I’d support her, body and soul.

.....

“Wait, did I just propose to her?!”

Dammit, I’m an idiot! The hell did I go and do that for?! I mean, seriously, why’d it have to be that finger?! That’s where you put an engagement ring! Er,

on Earth, I guess. No idea about here. Maybe they don't even use rings like that in this world?

“But the way she reacted... Dammit, what's going on here?!”

I got the feeling I was just making excuses at that point, but either way, I ran after her again.

Shit! I swear, as soon as I smooth this whole misunderstanding over, I'm going to look up where the Heroes are and figure out just what's up with this world! But, I guess...

“If Altria-san's happy, maybe that's enough,” I muttered as I ran, leaving the pile of rubble behind.

Far up in the blue sky above me, I thought I could see the spirit of the Treasure Chest giving me a thumbs up.

Epilogue

“One, two, three.” After moving his piece three squares forward, Terry looked at the space he’d landed on. “Hey, look, I get a reward for saving someone’s life!”

“Huh?” said Bel Jizel, raising an eyebrow. “How much?”

“10,000G, looks like.”

“Ten what?!”

“My turn next!” Bosco picked up the die and rolled it. “Oh, I get three, too.”

I nodded. “Alright, go on and move.”

“One, two... Oh, look! I get 50,000G as a gift from whoever’s turn is next ‘cause I had a kid!”

“Wow, that’s a big gift... And it’s my turn next, dammit!”

I was playing a board game with that fatso Terry and Bosco the scarecrow.

“Humans have the coolest games, huh?” Terry enthused.

“Yeah, this sure is something. What’d you say it was called, again?”

“Um...” He looked at the box. “It says ‘The Life Game.’”

The game was simple enough. We’d roll the dice and move along little squares on the board.

“It’s more than a human game,” Bosco added. “I heard one of the Heroes brought it from another world!”

“Another world, huh?” I mused. “Wonder what it’s like.”

I couldn’t help imagining what that place was like. We were at war with the humans now but weren’t a fan of violence. Heck, all any of us demonkin wanted was to be left alone.

“I sure hope they don’t have war there,” I muttered.

Terry seemed to notice the mood was getting heavier. “Oh, how about we play cards now?”

“Cards? What kinda cards?”

“It’s a set of 52 of them, you see. There are four types—hearts, diamonds, spades, and clubs—and they’ve got the numbers 1 through 13 written on them.”

“Huh. So what kinda game can you play with those?”

“Oh, my friend told me about those!” Bosco chimed in. “There’s poker, Old Maid... Oh, and Bullshit! Apparently, you can play all kinds of games with them.”

“Poke her? Who’re we poking, the old maid? How’re we supposed to play either of those if we don’t have any old ladies with us? Sounds kinda messed up to me.”

“Uh, no, I don’t think any of the games need women.”

“Damn, that’s confusing. So how do you play ‘em, then?”

Even though those games all sounded screwed up, they might turn out to be fun after all. It couldn’t hurt to try.

Man, humans are something else. Who’d have thought you could play so many games with just one thing?

“Well, the only one I know the rules for is Bullshit.”

“Great, let’s play that.”

Terry explained the rules to us. Basically, you had to hold your cards so the other players couldn’t see them, and you had to take turns putting cards face down in a pile in the middle of the table. Then you had to go in order from 1 to 13, too. The trick was, if you didn’t have the card you needed to play, you had to lie and play some other card instead. If someone thought you were lying, they’d yell, ‘Bullshit!’ and if you were lying, you’d have to take all the cards. If you weren’t lying, the person who yelled bullshit would take all the cards.

Damn, this game's just sick. Who'd ever call bullshit, then?! It's too damn risky! Wait... is that the point? You're supposed to get some kinda thrill outta that?! Huh... I guess Reiya-sama might like this.

With that, we started playing.

All I have to do is never lie, and I'll win. Haha, I'm a genius!

"Seven," Terry played.

"This is eight," Bosco said.

"Alright, here comes my nine—"

"Bullshit," they both called instantly.

"Noooooooooo!"

In the end, I lost big time. As it turned out, you needed at least four people to play it properly.

Dammit!

As we continued to enjoy our day off, the door suddenly flew open, and Reiya stormed in.

"....." She fixed us with an unexpectedly serious look.

"R-Reiya-sama?" I stammered. "Everything okay?"

She didn't answer; instead, she stalked right up to us. We all sat ramrod-straight in our chairs and looked up at her. After a moment, she finally spoke.

"...It seems as though the Black Dragon God-sama was defeated."

"...Huh?" All three of us exchanged baffled looks.

The Black Dragon God was defeated? No, that's impossible.

After all, he was the second strongest person in the realm, second only to the Demon King himself. Terry and Bosco looked every bit as confused as I was.

As if to drive it home, Reiya repeated herself, "The Black Dragon God-sama was defeated."

"....."

We could tell from the look on her face that she was serious. I was half-tempted to call Bullshit.

“I’m headed to the Black Dragon God’s Labyrinth to help him regain his strength.”

“L-Let us come, too!” I offered.

She shook her head. “No, I need you to hold down the fort here.”

The look on her face was so grave that none of us tried to argue. Besides, none of us were strong enough to help her out.

Man, if only we hadn’t sent those humans there... This’s my fault for putting both the Black Dragon God and Reiya through this mess.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she continued. “But don’t let it bother you. Not even I imagined the Black Dragon God-sama could ever lose. Your idea was quite good even if you didn’t think it through fully. And since he was defeated inside the Labyrinth, he should return to life before too long. I’ll be heading there to ensure that he returns at his full strength since he might not be able to manage that on his own.”

I felt deeply moved by her words.

That’s our Reiya-sama! Even if she can’t find a guy, she’s still amazing!

I didn’t doubt she could bring the Black Dragon God back to life at full strength. As I looked at her in adoration, she smiled sadly.

“Now, if only I could do the same for His Highness....”

“Reiya-sama...”

“A-Anyhow!” She quickly composed herself. “I trust that you’ll protect this castle with your lives while I’m gone.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the three of us replied in unison.

Seeing that, Reiya nodded in satisfaction. She created a circle of Teleportation Magic beneath her and was gone a moment later in a flash of light.

After ensuring she was gone, I turned to address Terry and Bosco.

“Alright, guys, listen up!”

“Yes, Bel-san?” Terry asked.

“You’re looking pretty serious,” Bosco noted.

I could tell they were both a little worried about the look on my face.

Man, I’ve got such great men!

With that, I came clean about what was eating at me.

“So we’re in charge of the castle now, but, uh... What are we supposed to do?”

“Oh, Bel-san.”

They both shook their heads sadly. Not even Reiya’s punishment hurt as much as that.

To be continued in *The Fruit of Evolution, Volume 3*

Back Matter

Author: Miku My hobbies include going to karaoke and reading. I'm also starting university next year. Flawed as it may be, I sincerely hope you enjoy my work. (February 2015)

Illustrator: Umiko/U35

I was born on November 17 in Shimane Prefecture. My favorite things are cooked potatoes and summer skies. (February 2015)



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